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Current State of Oral Health in Kent County
Local Coalition releases report illustrating areas of need

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., – The Kent County Oral Health Coalition recently released *The Kent County 2016 Oral Health Exam*, a report on the current state of oral health in Kent County. In 2013, the coalition released an initial community based report illustrating the need for improved access and education around oral health.

“Almost 20 percent of the adult survey participants stated they were unable to receive dental care because they couldn’t afford the cost,” said Colette Smiley, D.D.S., Co-Chairperson of the Kent County Oral Health Coalition. “No family should be forced to have their oral health needs take a back seat to other necessities.”

Since the release of the *2013 Oral Health Exam*, the landscape of oral health coverage for children and young adults has improved. In October 2015, Healthy Kids Dental was approved for Kent County’s Medicaid eligible children and has recently expanded to cover individuals up to age 21. Any child on Medicaid between the ages zero and 21 is now automatically enrolled in the program.

“It is critical that dental care begin within six months after a baby’s first tooth appears in order to lay a foundation of success for our children,” said Edward Cox, M.D., Co-Chairperson of the Kent County Oral Health Coalition. “Unfortunately, the community survey revealed that almost half the parents either didn’t know or weren’t sure if their child was for eligible Healthy Kids Dental.”

The data collected for the report was gathered through the distribution of three community based surveys for parents of children ages zero through five, adults 18+ and seniors 65+ with the assistance of the Kent County Health Department. Three community focus groups were facilitated in partnership with Grand Rapids African American Health Institute (GRAAHI).

Key findings of the report include:

- the need for additional dental providers willing to accept Medicaid patients
- additional community education promoting awareness of Healthy Kids Dental coverage is needed
- high cost of care, limited third-party coverage and lack of education around oral health are key barriers to receiving care

The comprehensive report can be found at healthnetwm.org/programs/kent-county-oral-health-coalition-kcohc/kcohc-research.

Members of the Kent County Oral Health Coalition steering committee are available for interviews, please contact Sarah Wilson, Communications Coordinator at swilson@healthnetwm.org to arrange interviews.

(fact sheet follows)

ACCESS AND COST – TWO ISSUES TO RECEIVING CARE:

- Almost 20% of adult survey participants reported they were unable to receive dental care because they could not afford the cost (Kent County Oral Health Exam, 2016).
- Almost 30% of adult survey participants stated they do not have a dentist (Kent County Oral Health Exam, 2016).
- In a comparison of the 2008 and 2014 Behavioral Health Risk Factor Surveys conducted in Michigan, results show a six percent increase from 25.2 percent to 31.2 percent of adults that have not had a dental visit in the last year.
- The 2016 Oral Health Exam reports 49.5 percent of adults with less than a high school education in Kent County have not been to the dentist in the past year; an increase of 5.7 percent from 43.8 percent as reported in the 2013 Oral Health Exam (Kent County Oral Health Exam, 2013)

ORAL HEALTH FOR CHILDREN IN KENT COUNTY

- Thirty-two percent of the 475 parents surveyed with children under the age of 5 knew their child should visit the dentist between the appearance of the first tooth and age one. However 57 percent of parents were not sure when their child should see a dentist for the first time (Kent County Oral Health Exam, 2016).
- The Michigan Dental Association suggests that if parents give a child a bottle at nap or bedtime, the contents should be water: beverages such as milk and juice can cause early childhood tooth decay. Thirty-six percent of parent survey participants reported that their child's bottle normally contains juice, milk or soda.
- Healthy Kids Dental was approved for Kent County (one of the last counties to receive the benefit) in October 2015 for children ages 0-12. The final expansion to children ages 13-21 was approved to begin October 1, 2016.
- Almost 50 percent of parent survey participants stated that they didn't know, or were not sure if their child was eligible for Healthy Kids Dental.
- In a recent report released by Delta Dental, Kent County had the highest Healthy Kids Dental utilization rates from Oct. 1, 2015 to Mar. 31, 2016 at 44.75 percent.

PROVIDER SHORTAGE IN KENT COUNTY

- With 427 dentists in a county of 636,369 residents; there is only 1 dentist per 1,490 people. Based on the Health Professional Shortage Area Guidelines, portions of Kent County are in a dental shortage area.
- Since the publication of the 2013 Oral Health Exam, 75 more dentists practice in Kent County but there are still not enough dentists to sufficiently serve our community. Without enough dentists, especially Medicaid-participating dentists in Kent County, accessing oral health services becomes more of a challenge for the population.

FOCUS GROUP KEY THEMES:

- The existence of additional low cost or free access points for oral care are needed
- Lack of money and no or insufficient insurance coverage are the primary reasons why adults and children do not access oral health care
 - "If I only make \$300 per week, taking \$30 out of my check for oral health is not an option... and if I have to choose between oral health and healthcare – oral health loses." – Hispanic/Latino group participant (translated)
- Participants had basic oral health knowledge, however additional education would be beneficial