



Oral Health Disparities for Children in Ohio's Appalachian Counties

On May 4, 2016, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio issued the report *Ohio's Appalachian Children at a Crossroads: A Roadmap for Action*. The report is an update of a report they issued 15 years ago looking at the well-being of the region's children.

One of the report's key findings is that there are clear health disparities between Appalachian children and children statewide. The report finds "[c]hildren in Appalachia face shortages of primary, dental, and mental health providers" and that "[h]ealth issues such as childhood obesity, food insecurity, and lack of dental care disproportionately affect Appalachian children."

While primary care provider shortages have improved since Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio) issued its first report, dental provider shortages have gotten worse. In 2015, 28 Appalachian counties were designated Dental Health Professional Shortage areas—double the number of counties with the designation in 2001.

Accessing dental care is the single most common unmet health need among children in the region. Appalachian children are 1.5 times more likely than children statewide to have untreated dental decay. Many Appalachian children have never seen the dentist and in five Appalachian counties (Perry, Vinton, Belmont, Holmes, and Noble) more than 20 percent of the children have never visited the dentist.

CDF-Ohio makes recommendations to ensure that child health in Appalachian Ohio becomes a priority. One of its five recommendations is to modernize the dental care workforce to expand access to care. The report states that to ease the current dental health provider shortages, "the scope of practice of dental hygienists, dental therapists, and dental hygienist therapists are expanded to meet children's basic oral health care needs."

Dental Access Now! agrees that to expand access to care, we need to address the dental workforce by allowing dental therapists to practice in Ohio. A dental therapist is a mid-level provider who is rigorously trained in preventive and routine dental care. Working under a dentist's supervision, dental therapists expand the reach of the dental care team, providing routine services like filling cavities.

The question is not *if* Ohio needs to expand the dental workforce in Ohio but a matter of *when*. Reducing regulatory burdens on dental hygienists and allowing dental therapist to practice will expand access to dental care in Dental Health Professional Shortage areas in Appalachia and across the state. We cannot wait another 15 years.

For more information, please contact David Maywhoor, Dental Access Now!, 614-456-0060.