

## Children's dental care month: 75 years later, work continues in Ohio

Written by: Mary Kuhlman, February 3, 2016

Ohio children probably don't pause to think of the impact of sugary Valentines Day treats on their teeth, but experts say poor dental health can cause a lifetime of problems.

It's National Children's Dental Health Month, which began on this day 75 years ago in Ohio. Despite being nearly entirely preventable, tooth decay is the most common disease in children. As president and CEO of the Miami Valley Child Development Center, Mary Burns says it's heartbreaking to see little ones suffering from dental woes.

"A lot of studies of lower-income children who have poor oral health care, they're more likely to experience dental pain and then, they miss school, they have trouble eating," she says. "It's just a very sad scenario for them."

According to the Dental Access Now project, 340,000 Ohio kids have never seen a dentist, and half of Ohio third-graders already have a history of tooth decay.

Burns explains some families find it challenging to get to a dentist. And while the center works to ensure children receive oral health care, she notes about 14 percent of kids in their Head Start program who need dental treatment don't receive a follow-up.

"We do really well with getting to a higher level, only to find out we can't get the treatment," says Burns. "That's very, very sad for us. Even though we have that many children that need dental treatment, we haven't been able to get the needed follow-up."

Ohio has 84 dental health professional shortage areas, where there aren't enough dentists to meet the local needs. To improve access, some health-care groups are promoting the use of mid-level dental therapists. These practitioners can perform basic preventive and restorative procedures under the supervision of a dentist, and are used in Alaska, Maine and Minnesota.



It's estimated nearly half of Ohio children have never been to a dentist.