



## Flashing a Grin on World Smile Day a Struggle for Some Ohioans

Written by: Mary Kuhlman, October 2, 2015

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Folks around the globe today are celebrating World Smile Day with acts of kindness - and, of course, by flashing a toothy grin. But not everyone may want to share their smile.

Fourteen percent of Ohioans ages 19 to 64 have an unmet dental problem, according to the 2015 Ohio Medicaid Assessment Survey. The problem is twofold, said David Maywhoor, director of the "Dental Access Now!" project. Eighty-four areas in Ohio don't have enough dentists to meet the needs of the community, and only about 15 percent of dentists will see a significant number of Medicaid patients.



"Whether due to a dental-provider shortage or the inability to find a dentist who takes Medicaid or uninsured patients," Maywhoor said, "too many Ohioans just don't have the access to the dental care that they need."

Tooth pain can make learning difficult for children in Ohio. Credit: bamagirl/Morguefile

Maywhoor said access to oral health care can be expanded in Ohio by allowing dental therapists to practice as part of the dental team. They can provide preventive and routine care while working under the supervision of a dentist.

Common dental problems include cavities, fractured teeth and gum disease. Tooth pain can make learning difficult for children, Maywhoor said, and also can have a dramatic impact on the workforce.

"People go to work with pain in their mouth, it has an impact on the quality of work that they perform; it threatens them with being terminated," he said. "For people who don't have good dental care and have bad teeth, the potential of getting into one of those first-line jobs is very limited."

The Dental Access Now! project is proposing legislation that would allow dental therapists to work in Ohio. Maywhoor said it would improve access to dental care for hard-to-reach populations including children enrolled in Medicaid, people in rural communities and low-income families.

"If every one of our 84 dental health professional shortage areas in Ohio had just one dental therapist," he said, "nearly 70,000 patients would have dental care."

According to some critics of the use of dental therapists, their education is not sufficient. Maywhoor countered that the Commission on Dental Accreditation recently authorized the establishment of an accreditation process for dental-therapy education programs.

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