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Medicaid Expansion Proponent February 27, 2024

Oral Health Kansas is the statewide advocacy organization dedicated to promoting the importance of lifelong oral health by shaping policy and educating the public. We stand in support of Medicaid expansion.

Dental diseases like tooth decay and gum disease are nearly 100% preventable. When people have access to routine preventive dental care, they are able to catch any problems early and stay healthier. Prevention and early detection of disease are always easier and far less expensive than more complex treatments. With expanded Medicaid coverage, Kansans would have the ability to seek dental care at the first sign of trouble rather than waiting until the condition worsens. This early intervention can prevent the progression of dental problems, leading to better outcomes and lower healthcare costs in the long run. For example, addressing tooth decay in its early stages can prevent the need for more extensive and expensive treatments such as root canals or extractions. People with healthy teeth are able to get and keep jobs as well as better maintain their overall health. **Expanding Medicaid in Kansas will ensure adults have access to routine dental care, which will keep them healthier and ready to work.**

In 2020 Oral Health Kansas collaborated with the Kansas Health Institute to produce a report called "Dental Insurance Coverage and Unmet Dental Needs in Kansas" The report found that 34% of working age adults in Kansas do not have dental insurance. This uninsurance rate far outstretches even the health uninsurance rate. **Only about 43% of jobs offer dental insurance, which means that the rest of the workforce must either pay for their own insurance or go without dental insurance.** Expanding Medicaid in Kansas will help close this dental insurance coverage gap and begin to access much needed dental care.¹

One unintended consequence of not expanding Medicaid is risking the loss of access to sedation dental care. Few people require sedation in order to receive dental care, but for the people who really need it, including some people with disabilities, it can be extremely hard to find. Some small-town Kansas hospitals are committed to making their operating rooms available for sedation dental care, but these same small-town hospitals are at risk of closure because Medicaid has not been expanded. **People with Medicaid coverage and even with private insurance coverage risk losing access to sedation dental care if their local hospital is forced to close.** The list of places people can access sedation dental care is very small, and it would be an additional burden if more of those access points are lost because Medicaid has not been expanded.

Organizations opposed to Medicaid expansion have cited the tragic death of Deamonte Driver as a reason to not expand Medicaid. His story is not a reason to retreat from expansion. Rather it is an important reminder of how to learn from the consequences of a tragedy and to commit to doing better.

In 2007, a twelve-year-old boy named Deamonte Driver died when an infection from an abscessed tooth went to his brain. Deamonte's mother, a lawyer, and a slew of case managers worked hard, but could not get the dental care he needed for the abscess in time to save his life.

When Deamonte died, the governor of Maryland's first reaction was to form a task force charged with crafting a list of remedies for the state's broken Medicaid system. His reaction was not to retreat and provide less support to low-income people through Medicaid. It was to do more to keep the people of his state healthy. Maryland adopted a number of policy changes and invested in an oral health infrastructure to ensure families like the Drivers can access the care they need.

The loss of Deamonte is proof that more needs to be done to ensure children and adults do not suffer from preventable diseases. In the years since his death, the oral health community has come together to demonstrate the importance of helping families do three things:

1. Access dental providers when they need them.
2. Be able to afford dental care.
3. Understand how to take good care of their teeth.

Deamonte's family made the best of his tragic death. His mother became a dental assistant, and the community raised funds to establish the "Deamonte Driver Dental Project" mobile clinic, which goes to schools to provide the dental care students need. Deamonte's mom honored her son's memory by working in that mobile clinic. His oldest brother honored his memory by naming his first son Deamonte. Deamonte's legacy is systems change with the goal of ensuring low-income families have access to the services they need. His life was cut tragically short, and nothing can change that. But he taught all of us a powerful lesson that the lives of people living in poverty are important and are worth investing in.

Oral Health Kansas believes Medicaid expansion is one of the most important policies Kansas could adopt. It would be the investment that we need in order to assure working Kansans can lead happy, healthy, and productive lives. Thank you for the opportunity to share the reasons Medicaid expansion will help Kansans and tell you the story of Deamonte Driver and his legacy. Oral Health Kansas fully supports Medicaid expansion and urges the Kansas Legislature to approve it.

Sincerely,



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Executive Director
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¹ Kansas Health Institute: "Dental Insurance Coverage and Unmet Dental Needs in Kansas," 2020.
<https://www.oralhealthkansas.org/Dental%20Insurance%20Report/DentalInsuranceUnmetNeedsKansas.pdf>