

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oral health is essential to overall health and quality of life. Left untreated, dental diseases can result in infection and severe pain, an inability to perform daily activities, and in very rare cases, death. Each year at least 18,900 Kansans visit emergency rooms with dental pain, and the vast majority of these visits are preventable. The frequency of visits points to inadequate access to oral health care for thousands of Kansans.

Kansas Oral Health Connections sees three types of barriers to accessing good oral health: access to a payment source, access to a provider, and willingness to access services. All three must be present in order for people to have adequate access to oral health. Together, we are working to address each of these types of access.

Over the past fifteen years, Kansas has developed a deep oral health infrastructure, including the establishment in 2003 of the state oral health advocacy organization, Oral Health Kansas, and establishment of an oral health office at the

Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The number of safety-net dental offices has more than quadrupled in recent years, and preventive dental services are now available for adults enrolled in KanCare. In 2003 Kansas enacted a law that allows dental hygienists with “Extended Care Permits” (ECPs) to practice in community-based settings serving underserved people, such as schools, disability organizations, and nursing facilities. In 2012, an amendment to the ECP law passed, which allows ECPs with additional training to remove decay, place temporary fillings, and adjust dentures.

All of these policy improvements have laid the groundwork for Kansas to address the unmet dental needs of our residents, but there is still much to be done. Poor and underserved adults and children fundamentally lack access to quality, affordable oral health care. They struggle to gain access to dental providers and a way

to pay for dental services.

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have become ECP hygienists, and thousands of Kansans visit emergency rooms each year with dental pain. A report by the state’s Bureau of Oral Health shows that Kansas nursing home residents have had significant dental care in the past, but over one-third now have untreated dental disease. A 2012 Bureau of Oral Health survey reported that forty-eight percent of Kansas children have dental decay or have had it in the past. Oral Health America’s 2016 State of Decay report ranked Kansas 31st in the nation with an overall state composite score of 42% or an F in areas such as community water fluoridation, rates of edentulism, and Medicaid dental services.

This 2017 Kansas Oral Health Snapshot outlines key economic and oral health indicators for each Kansas county. The report covers the demographics of each county’s population, dental providers, and the dramatic needs of the underserved populations. We hope it will spark conversations in communities and lead to new ideas to address the unmet needs. ■

