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February 18, 2019

Testimony for House Social Services Budget Committee

Chairman Carpenter and Members of the Committee:

My name is Christi Nance, and I am the Policy Director at Oral Health Kansas, Inc. We are the state-wide advocacy organization dedicated to promoting the importance of lifelong dental health by shaping policy and educating the public so Kansans know that all mouths matter. Thank you for the opportunity to share our opinion on the Department for Children and Families budget with the Committee today.

Last year, we met with Department for Children and Families (DCF) staff to discuss oral health issues and how we could increase oral health awareness. One issue of concern to us, particularly because of the connections between poverty, oral health, and overall health, was a simple issue: public benefit recipients cannot use their public benefits to purchase a toothbrush or toothpaste. Public benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), can be used to purchase food and household items, and to pay household bills. With no current public assistance for dental hygiene products, families may go without them entirely or resort to sharing one toothbrush among the family. This issue came to us when we convened a community forum, and local stakeholders told us they are concerned that low-income families do not have access to the most basic dental supplies like toothbrushes and are not able to use public benefits to purchase them.

Most public assistance programs are not intended to be permanent sources of income or services. Instead, they are designed to be temporary supports to help families and adults get back into the workforce until they can sustain their family on their own. Not only would dental hygiene products support improving their oral and overall health, but it would also increase their confidence and odds of employability. The American Dental Association conducted research that echoed this point, finding that over 1 in 4 low-income Kansans felt the appearance of their mouth and teeth affected their ability to interview for a job.¹

We spoke with DCF staff about finding a solution to allow those on public assistance to use their benefits for dental hygiene products and discussed the possibility of submitting waivers for SNAP and/or TANF. Although we have not had an opportunity to discuss these options with Acting Secretary Howard and her staff, we hope they will be interested in working with us on the issue. We believe the support and encouragement of this Committee may accelerate those conversations.

As the Committee works to guarantee every Kansan has the dental coverage they need, please do not hesitate to contact me (cnance@ohks.org) if Oral Health Kansas can answer questions or otherwise assist the Committee.

Sincerely,

Christi Nance
Policy Director

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¹ American Dental Association. Oral Health and Well-Being in Kansas. <https://www.ada.org/en/science-research/health-policy-institute/oral-health-and-well-being/Kansas-facts>