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Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee
Hearing on SB 252
January 23-24, 2020

Oral Health Kansas is 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. We stand in support of SB 252.

One of the stories organizations opposed to Medicaid expansion have cited in the past as a reason to not expand Medicaid is the tragic death of Deamonte Driver. 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, 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.

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 policy decisions 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 tell you the story of Deamonte Driver and his legacy. Oral Health Kansas fully supports SB 252 and urges the members of the committee to vote for it.

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