January 31, 2007
Testimony by Jesse White-Fresé, Project Director, New Britain Oral Health Collaborative, to the Public Health Committee.

Good Morning Representative Sayers, Senator Handley, and committee members. My name is Jesse White-Fresé, and I speak to you today as the Community Health Center's Project Director for the New Britain Oral Health Collaborative. I thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to support Senate Bill No. 1, *An Act Increasing Access to Affordable, Quality Health Care*.

We are pleased to support this initiative that includes oral health as a critical element of overall health. But we must recognize that we have a crisis in Connecticut -- an oral health crisis -- that particularly impacts publicly insured and uninsured children and their families. We know there are nearly 2500 dentists in Connecticut, but less than 100 dentists statewide participate in HUSKY. A disproportionate share of the dental care provided to low income and vulnerable individuals falls to hospital dental clinics, community health centers, school-based dental programs, and other safety-net facilities. The demand for services generally exceeds the capacity available at these sites.

On Give Kids a Smile Day this Friday, 15 private dentists in the New Britain area will generously provide free care to 150 low income and uninsured children, but those same dentists are not motivated to participate in HUSKY the other 364 days of the year because there is no financial incentive to do so. The #1 reason cited by private dental providers for their lack of participation in HUSKY is simple - abysmally low reimbursement rates. It is important that we raise the reimbursement rates to the 70th percentile so we can expand access by including many more dentists. The consequences of such a small pool of dental providers for HUSKY insured children can be illustrated by the following example.

As an active partner in the Collaborative, the New Britain High - School Based Health Center provides medical, mental health, and dental hygiene services to the 1900 students enrolled in the health center. A licensed dental hygienist, employed by the Community Health Center of New Britain, provides hygiene services 3 days each week during the school year. Students in this large school of 3200 adolescents are generally between the ages of 14 and 20. This school year, 239 enrolled students have received dental hygiene services. 62% of those students had dental decay, and 48% had decay in 3 teeth or more, mostly more. 11 students complained of severe pain in their teeth, and 3 students already have gum disease. Many are in need of root canals, extractions, and extensive dental work. All of the students were referred to community dental providers to treat the decay, and most of these students are insured by HUSKY, but again, with a very limited number of HUSKY providers and long wait times to gain an appointment at many facilities, these adolescents are not receiving care in a timely manner. What is most alarming is the

simple fact that prior to their visit to the school based health center, many of these children have never received any dental care at all, and at 16 years old may be having their teeth cleaned for the first time in their life! The negative impact to their overall health and well-being is dangerous and of great concern. Children deserve access to dental services early in their lives and on a regular basis. A larger pool of HUSKY dental providers could significantly contribute to improved oral health early on in life.

As members of the Public Health Committee, I know that you care about the oral health care of Connecticut's children as much as we do in our communities, and ask that you support increased reimbursement rates as an important step in the goal to increase the number of HUSKY dental providers in our State. Our children deserve no less.

Thank you.

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