

Testimony to the Human Services Committee

HB 5617 - An Act Delaying Implementation of and Making Revisions to the Charter Oak Health Plan.
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by Marty Milkovic
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Senator Harris, Representative Villano and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Marty Milkovic and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, a statewide coalition of people and organizations interested in access to oral health care. Our mission is **Oral Health for All**.

First let me thank you all, the General Assembly and the Governor for your work to increase access to health care. The Charter Oak Plan and this hearing are an important part of the discussion on how we can best achieve good health for all of our residents.

I am here to support HB 5617 and in particular, the fact that it adds dental care to the Charter Oak program. We support this and the other important and necessary improvements to the Plan that are contained in the bill.

Oral health is strongly linked to overall health. Maintaining good oral health is a cost-efficient and effective way to contribute to overall health. It is only 4 or 5% of national health care costs, yet it can pay dividends far beyond that. In fact several health insurance plans are including certain preventative oral health procedures in their basic coverage for just that reason.

This is so because poor oral health is linked to a number of other health problems. According to www.MayoClinic.com:

- **Heart Disease**
Research shows that several types of cardiovascular disease may be linked to oral health. These include heart disease, clogged arteries, stroke and bacterial endocarditis. Some researchers believe that bacteria from gum disease can enter the bloodstream and travel through the arteries to the heart, affecting the cardiovascular system. Although periodontal disease seems to be associated with heart disease, more studies are needed before the link can be confirmed with certainty.
- **Pregnancy and birth**

Gum disease has been linked to premature birth. Some research has shown that disease-causing organisms in a pregnant woman's mouth can wind up in the placenta or amniotic fluid, possibly causing premature birth. Unfortunately, treating periodontal disease during pregnancy may be too late, because the infection may have already spread in the woman's body. This is why it's vital to maintain excellent oral health before one gets pregnant.

- **Diabetes**
Diabetes increases your risk of gum disease, cavities, tooth loss, dry mouth, and a variety of oral infections. Conversely, poor oral health can make diabetes more difficult to control. Infections may cause blood sugar to rise and require more insulin to keep it under control.
- **HIV/AIDS**
In some cases, one of the first signs of AIDS may appear in the mouth, with severe gum infection. One may also develop persistent white spots or unusual lesions on the tongue or in the mouth.
- **Osteoporosis**
The first stages of bone loss may show up in the teeth. A dentist may be able to spot this on routine dental X-rays.
- **Other conditions**
Many other conditions may make their presence known in the mouth before you know anything's wrong. These may include Sjogren's syndrome, certain cancers, eating disorders, syphilis, gonorrhea and substance abuse.

In addition to adding dental care, We also support the other improvements to the Charter Oak Plan that are contained in HB 5617. These include elimination of the six-month period that a prospective participant in the Plan would have to endure without health insurance, reduction of certain out-of-pocket costs, the inclusion of important coverage for vision and mental health services, the added external appeals procedures and the requirement that the Commissioner report regularly and publically on the implementation of the Plan.

Another important improvement is the requirement that there be separate contracting for the Plan from the HUSKY program. While there are some reasons to jointly bid Charter Oak and HUSKY, I believe they are overshadowed by risks to both programs. Similarly another bill before the Committee, HB 5718, would delay implementation of the new HUSKY contracts. I believe that is also a good idea, it ensures that an adequate amount of time is available to implement the new contracts.

So again we appreciate your concern about access to health care. I strongly encourage you to add dental care to the Charter Oak Plan and make the other needed improvements.

Thank you.