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SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER, INC
BRIDGEPORT, CT

TESTIMONY TO:

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

March 2, 2009

RE: PROPOSED CUTS FOR ADULT DENTAL CARE FOR MEDICAID AND SAGA RECIPIENTS

Dear Senator Doyle, Representative Walker, and members of the Human Services Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address a very serious public health and public policy issue: access to oral health care for adults who are recipients of Medicaid and SAGA benefits.

I am Anna Washington, Dental Practice Manager, of Southwest Community Health Center and with me today is Anna Washington, Dental Practice Manager for Southwest Community Health Center (SWCHC). SWCHC is one of two Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) in Bridgeport, CT. SWCHC provides comprehensive medical, behavioral health and dental services to over 15,000 medically underserved residents rendering 71,000 visits in 2008. SWCHC operates two full service dental centers to meet the oral health needs of Bridgeport residents.

As this Appropriations Committee is well aware, need for oral health care services for the State's most vulnerable population groups is a major public health issue that cannot be disregarded, even in very tough economic times. Persons living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, persons of color, persons without jobs or health insurance and who experience linguistic, housing, and transportation barriers to accessing care, can have very high rates of dental disease, as well as other chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease, compromised birth outcomes, etc. These socio-demographic and social health indicators affecting access to primary health care have been well documented.

With respect to CT's Medicaid program, access to oral health care for Medicaid recipients has been the subject of a recent lawsuit settlement. We applaud the State and the Department of Social Services for its recent increase in dental reimbursement rates to attract more private dentists into the Medicaid provider network. However, despite these recent efforts to expand access to dental care, *it is the community health centers across CT, - the safety net providers- that day in and day out, have delivered high quality oral health care to children and adults, without regard to their ability to pay for dental care.*

Southwest has provided a full spectrum of preventive, restorative, and rehabilitative dental care to Bridgeport area residents for over 29 years. Our seven operatory dental center located at 361 Bird St. began service provision in 1980 and our second seven operatory dental center, located at 968 Fairfield Avenue, came on line in July 2007. Construction of the second dental center was made possible through $250,000 in State bonding funds. The State's money has certainly been well spent. Utilization statistics for SWCHC's dental practice for 2008 indicate that 7,046 unduplicated individuals visited our dental providers totaling 21,258 visits for the calendar year. Of the 7,046 dental patients, 4,948 or 70.2% are adults ages 21 years and older. These adults accounted for 72.8% of all dental visits (15,486 annual visits), resulting in a 3 visit per user ratio in 2008.

Southwest directly employs 5.6 FTE dentists and 4.0 FTE dental hygienists. As of Sept.19 2008, Wednesday evening and Saturday morning hours for dental care are available with 138 adults accessing services during these expanded hours of operation. On Jan. 26, 2009, SWCHC expanded dental (and medical) services to Monday evenings as well. Legislative funding to DSS made this expansion possible.

Improving the lives of people – by offering affordable, accessible oral health care is SWCHC's mission and its impact is immediate and dramatic. Three brief patient vignettes illustrate this point:

#1: Hasan is a refugee of Darfur in Africa now residing in Bridgeport. He works a minimum wage job while attending night school to obtain his teaching certificate. He and his wife and 5 children are covered under Medicaid. He understands the importance of dental care and its effect on overall physical health . He and the family keep their appointments with the SWCHC dentist and hygienist. **Hasan is grateful for his Medicaid coverage and knows that without it, he would not be able to afford dental care for his family.**

#2: Mary Jane is a middle-aged grandmother, who overcame a turbulent childhood and is on Medicaid. She came to the SWCHC Bird St. dental department as an emergency. She was in such excruciating pain that all she wanted was to have her tooth pulled. The dentist determined that the tooth could be saved. **Mary Jane had the requisite dental work done to save that tooth and others and is now a true –believer in oral health care to the extent that she delayed a trip to see her grandchildren in Florida in order to be compliant with her dental appointment**

#3: At our new 968 Fairfield Avenue site, an elderly Hispanic woman came into the dental department. She had lived in this country for 10 years but could not afford dentures. The SWCHC dental staff worked with her and she paid for a full set of dentures based upon the discounted fee schedule charges, as she had no insurance. **A few days after being fitted with her dentures, she returned to the department to thank the dentist, as she had eaten meat for the first time in 10 Years.**

While we are meeting the needs of over 7,000 clients, all too many Bridgeport residents – adults and children - still need to access to dental care. *But if oral health care services for Medicaid and SAGA adults are eliminated, not only will existing recipients suffer, SWCHC will suffer as we will not have sufficient funding to keep the practice open.* As over 62% of our adults dental clients are Medicaid/SAGA recipients, eliminating this coverage would translate into a loss of $1,261,100 in revenue. SWCHC could not keep our existing dental workforce employed with such a revenue loss. Pediatric HUSKY patients and uninsured children and adults would be denied access to dental care. Assuming the other FQHC in Bridgeport, Optimus, has a similar Medicaid/SAGA population, then safety net dental services in Bridgeport would be decimated. Where would Bridgeport residents go? There are not enough private dentists in the State to absorb this type of practice loss. **In short- the most vulnerable clients would lose services and the entire City of Bridgeport would lose its oral health delivery system. The cost of safety net infrastructure collapse will far outweigh the costs of maintaining oral health care for adult Medicaid & SAGA recipients.**

Funding for oral health services for adult Medicaid & SAGA beneficiaries must be preserved. To do otherwise will result in a public health disaster. It is up to you to protect the State's most vulnerable citizens and the safety net provider infrastructure that DSS has relied upon to deliver care to the Medicaid/SAGA population.

Thank you for your attention.

Respectfully submitted,

Anna Washington,
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