

"Oral health for all"



**Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
On the Department of Social Services (DSS) portion of the Governor's Proposed Budget**

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Good evening. My name is Dr. Linda Erlanger and I represent the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, also known as COHI. COHI is the state's leading oral health advocate. Through advocacy, strategic partnerships and education, COHI works with stakeholders across Connecticut to create a public conscience that will advance oral health for all.

First, thank you Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee for holding this public hearing. We recognize the challenges being faced during this budget crisis and we appreciate your public service to the people of CT.

As has been noted on numerous occasions by COHI staff and other supporters, oral health is a vital component of one's general health. Oral health affects people physically and psychologically and influences how they grow, how they speak, chew, taste food and socialize, as well as their feelings of social well-being and their overall quality of life. The 2008 settlement of the Carr vs. Wilson-Coker lawsuit has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of dental providers in the Connecticut Dental Health Partnership and in the number of children receiving dental services under Medicaid. It is inspiring to see that the efforts of our advocates and our legislators have improved access to oral health care in Connecticut and we strive to see this progress continue.

Today, on behalf of our Board of Directors and other constituents, I want to say how immensely pleased we are that there were no wholesale cuts to adult dental services under the new administration's budget proposal. The administration's commitment to preservation of Medicaid services for individuals and families does not go unrecognized and we salute the Governor and the legislators for protecting the safety net.

At the same time, we ask that you refuse to accept the proposed copays for Medicaid recipients. We are concerned that imposing the copays will have reverse consequences on the state's economy. Families and individuals will not be able to afford the copays and, therefore, may go without necessary medications and care. When health problems are not addressed, conditions worsen over time and patients end up with avoidable visits to overburdened hospital emergency departments. This cycle will only increase expenses to an already overfilled economic bucket.

COHI supports the revenue enhancements proposed by Better Choices for Connecticut as a viable alternative to any health care cuts in the budget. Please strongly consider these recommendations over requiring copays from, or cutting essential services to, our most vulnerable citizens.

Please contact me at COHI, lindae@ctoralhealth.org or at 860-246-2644, should you have further questions or need additional information. Thank you again for this opportunity to present testimony to the Committee.