



## Oral Health for All

### **Testimony Supporting HB 5242 : *An Act Concerning Donated Dental Services***

Cathy J. Cohen  
Interim Executive Director  
Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI)  
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Senator Gerratana, Representative Ritter and Members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Cathy Cohen, Interim Executive Director of the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative. For the past decade, COHI has played a central role in ensuring access to oral health care for Connecticut's underserved population. COHI was instrumental in the settlement of the class action lawsuit, Carr vs. Wilson Coker which has significantly expanded access to oral health care across Connecticut. I have worked with COHI for nearly a year and have over twenty years of experience in healthcare administration and consulting.

We strongly support The Donated Dental Services Bill, which will establish a high functioning referral network and a corps of volunteer dentists and dental specialists to serve Connecticut's neediest residents: the disabled, elderly, medically compromised and other vulnerable populations. It will also ensure public awareness, as well as technical and administrative support for the program.

We would like to suggest amending the language in lines 5 and 6 of the bill to reflect the treatment philosophy of the Dental Lifeline Network, a national Donated Dental Services organization. Their philosophy is to serve the disabled, elderly and medically fragile. Many of these individuals are on Medicare which does not provide for dental care, and most are ineligible for Medicaid.

This allocation of just \$85,000 will go a long way toward extending access to oral health care services to those in need. For many Connecticut residents, a lack of dental insurance or access to adequate government support translates into minimal oral health care. As we know from the past year's media coverage, those with reduced access or attention to their dental health may suffer serious illness and even death. Moreover, the cost associated with just a few of these life threatening conditions such as heart disease, stroke or systemic infection, is enormous in contrast to this meager \$85,000 allocation. The connection between oral health and these serious complications is now well documented in the research literature.

Increasingly, studies have shown that oral infection from an abscess or chronic inflammation contributes to the risk and morbidity of common chronic health conditions. Studies suggest that oral infections may dramatically affect chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, endometriosis, and stroke.

While it is still difficult to know the full impact of the Governor's \$10 million FY13 budget adjustment to Medicaid funding, the large cuts will certainly impact Connecticut's underserved population. The most significant result of these cuts may well be to reduce widespread access to care.

Most of us in this room have never questioned our right to call a dentist or receive care, at a time of need. Please keep in mind that for many Connecticut residents this access is unaffordable or unavailable. This small appropriation will begin to address that inequity.

I urge you to support HB 5242 with the requested language change to lines 5 & 6. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have now or please feel free to contact me at your convenience and I would be glad to speak with you then.

Respectfully submitted,

Cathy J. Cohen, Interim Executive Director  
Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI)  
175 Main Street  
Hartford, CT 06106  
860.246.2644, Ext. 203  
[cathyc@ctoralhealth.org](mailto:cathyc@ctoralhealth.org)