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TESTIMONY to the Public Health Committee

March 23, 2012

Re: HB-5541, An Act Concerning Services Provided by Dental Professionals and Certification for Advanced Dental Hygiene Practitioners

Ellen Andrews, PhD
Executive Director

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support for HB 5541 and to thank the committee for raising this important bill.

We at the CT Health Policy Project have long worked to improve access to health care, including dental care, for Medicaid members. As a consumer advocate, we get calls every day on our helpline from consumers desperately seeking health care, often oral health care. As a member (and former staff to) the Council on Medical Assistance Program Oversight (formerly the Medicaid Managed Care Council) we hear regular reports on serious gaps in access to oral health care in that program. Access to dental care in Medicaid has been a chronic problem for decades, prompting a federal lawsuit against the state in 1999. HB 5541 offers an exciting opportunity to expand access to care for Medicaid members and all Connecticut residents that is working in other states. Improving access to oral health care is critical to overall well-being, and will prevent more serious and costly health issues in the future.

Thankfully, access to oral health care has improved significantly in recent years for HUSKY children but a great deal of unmet need remains. While the rate of children in Medicaid receiving preventive care grew by 30% from 2006 to 2010, still four in ten children in the state's program received no preventive care in 2010. And of the children lucky enough to receive any dental care in the program, 60% are not getting the recommended level of care. Black children are at highest risk of missing critical oral health care¹ and access for adults is even more limited than for children.

Even the gains we have achieved are at risk. The Medicaid dental care lawsuit resulted in dearly needed resources, including provider rate increases that have been widely credited with expanding capacity in the program. However those provisions of the lawsuit expire this August. It is critical that Connecticut take advantage of every opportunity to expand oral health provider capacity and HB 5541 offers such a promising opportunity.

Certifying advanced practice dental professionals holds enormous potential to address these unmet needs in our state. Expanding the number of people who can provide preventive care and treatment, with appropriate quality controls and certification by national accrediting boards, can only help address the unmet need in our state.

I urge you to pass HB 5541 to improve access to oral health care for HUSKY families and all of us. Thank you for your time and your commitment to improving the welfare of every Connecticut resident.

¹ Children's Dental Services in the HUSKY Program, CT Voices for Children, November 2011.