



www.BridgeToHealthySmiles.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 31, 2011

CONTACT: Kim Morreale

847-401-8564

kim@morrealepag.com

Michelle Arnold

312-623-6024

michelle@morrealepag.com

**NATIONAL CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH MONTH DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE
ORAL HEALTHCARE CRISIS IN COOK COUNTY**

Statewide campaign focuses on delivering quality oral health to Cook County residents

(Chicago, IL)- The Bridge to Health Smiles (BTHS) Campaign kicks off National Children's Dental Health Month by raising awareness about the need for expanded public dental programs in Cook County and offering to work with lawmakers on identifying a solution.

The Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) released a Dental Program Summary this month in response to a resolution introduced by Cook County Commissioner Peter Silvestri (R-9th District) asking CCDPH to complete an audit of county dental services. The resolution stated in part "Cook County is facing an oral healthcare crisis... with one of the lowest reimbursement rates in the country, Illinois is leaving thousands of hard working Cook County families caught in a painful, degrading and sometimes life threatening oral health care gap."

The report shows that between 2005 and 2009, the county closed half of its dental clinics, leaving just four clinics in Bridgeview, Cottage Grove, Maywood and Rolling Meadows where the average wait time to see a dentist is two to three months. In 2000, county clinics served close to 11,900 patients compared to 2009 where fewer than 5,000 patients were seen. The clinics perform only basic dental procedures such as cleanings and fillings and do not accept children or adults on public aid. Patient's who need more extensive work are turned away because the county lacks the resources to keep up with demand. Instead, patients are referred to Stroger Hospital Oral Surgery or University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry where patients can wait another two to three months for treatment. The county does not operate any clinics in the City of Chicago.

"The study proves that the county is not making public dental care a priority and that needs to be addressed," says Peter Silvestri, Cook County Commissioner (R-9th District). "It is important that we teach our children from an early age the importance of regular dental visits to avoid serious short and long term health risks."



www.BridgeToHealthySmiles.com

In Cook County, there is just one dental clinic for every 15,700 children. Poor oral health as a child can have long-term health implications into adulthood and is proven to impact a child's self-esteem and ability to perform in school. Dental decay is the most prevalent chronic disease in the country, five times more common than asthma. Still, 80 percent of children's tooth decay is found in just 25 percent of children. Dental disease among children from low-income families is widespread across the nation. Children with untreated dental decay cannot eat or sleep properly nor can they concentrate in school. In fact, in the United States, tooth decay accounts for 51 million hours of missed school each year.

"There is an alarming and dangerous disparity in the accessibility and spectrum of dental services offered in Cook County," says Dr. Cheryl Watson Lowry, Chicago Dental Society. "This study has given us valuable information on just how serious the barriers to accessing quality dental care are, now it's time to work together on a solution."

More than two-thirds of the counties in Illinois have been designated as Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas by the federal government, including Cook County. Barriers to care in Cook County are among the worst in the state, in part because nearly half of the states public aid population lives in Cook County.

"Dental Care is often forgotten when we talk about healthcare but is vital to health and is often one of the hardest services to find," said Commissioner Gainer. "Last summer, my office conducted a community assessment of health needs in Uptown and learned that 30 percent of our survey participants had a dental problem. More than half hadn't seen a dentist in more than a year. We must increase the availability of dental care to our community," Gainer continued.

Founded in 2008 by the Illinois State Dental Society and in partnership with the Chicago Dental Society, the Bridge to Healthy Smiles campaign is led by a diverse coalition of oral healthcare advocates and community groups committed to bridging the access to care gap for dental coverage in Illinois. The Bridge to Healthy Smiles coalition spearheaded the passage of legislation that will begin to improve access to oral healthcare in Illinois. These accomplishments will lay the groundwork to aid in developing dental clinics in Cook County. For more information visit www.bridgetohealthysmiles.com.

###