

News

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7,500 W.Va. school kids to get dental care

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- About 7,500 West Virginia children will receive free teeth cleanings, fillings and cavity-preventing sealants as part of a \$500,000 initiative to establish dental clinics in schools, Gov. Joe Manchin announced today.

Schools, local health departments and community health centers will be eligible to apply for grants of up to \$25,000 -- money they can use to purchase portable dental chairs, equipment and technical assistance.

"The oral health status of West Virginia children is horrific, and it has to be fixed," said Bobbi Jo Muto, a dental hygienist with Valley Health Systems and a member of the initiative's advisory board. "Poor oral health can be stopped. There's isn't anyone who wants to see a child suffer with a toothache and pain."

The program -- funded by the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and Appalachian Regional Commission -- plans to target low-income children in rural areas where dental care is scarce.

"The project is going to be providing preventive services," said Dr. David Walker, state dental director. "It's going to improve access to kids. It's going to get them in a dental 'home.'"

Marshall University's Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health will manage the program.

Recent studies have shown that about 38 percent of West Virginia children have untreated tooth decay.

Meanwhile, only about 36 percent of West Virginia kids eligible for Medicaid went to a dentist last year.

Dental disease is the single most prevalent chronic childhood disease -- five times more common than asthma.

Throughout the state, children with untreated cavities, abscessed teeth and gum disease are missing school, having difficulty concentrating, developing speech impediments, not eating right and not sleeping at night, oral health advocates said this afternoon.

"Health starts with your teeth," said Anne Pope, federal co-chair with the Appalachian Regional Commission. "The teeth are the first signs of a healthy person."

About 65 percent of West Virginia children have cavities by age 8, according to a West Virginia Healthy People study.

Dental disease hits especially hard among poor children. About 80 percent of cavities are in 20 percent of children -- mostly low-income kids.

Although many West Virginia dentists are willing to see Medicaid children, parents complain few dentists are willing to take new patients. West Virginia has more than 200,000 kids enrolled in Medicaid, a state-administered insurance program for the needy.

The \$500,00 grant is expected to fund about 20 school-based oral health projects. Program organizers predict the West Virginia initiative will become a model for other states in Appalachia.

"We should be able to solve a bit of our children's health care needs, and it can start with oral health," Manchin said. "This is going to make a difference in children's lives."

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