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Kids Forward Supports Governor's Plan to Improve Oral Health in Wisconsin

MADISON, WI –Kids Forward applauds Governor Evers' multifaceted approach toward addressing issues of oral health for Wisconsin. The package, which is part of the Governor's 2019-2021 biennial budget, includes just over \$43 million invested in the following areas:

- Increases dental Medicaid reimbursement rates for non-profit providers by 50 percent if at least 50 percent of their patients are enrolled in Medicaid. For-profit providers serving at least 5 percent of Medicaid patients would see a 30 percent increase.
- Authorizes licensure of dental therapists and funding for Wisconsin colleges to create a dental therapy education program in Wisconsin.
- Increases funding for Wisconsin Seal-A-Smile to expand the program's capacity to provide school-based oral health services to children across the state.
- Increases funding to low income and community dental clinics to serve patients who don't have access to dental insurance or are served through Medicaid.
- Expands the rural dental loan repayment program to incentivize providers to serve in rural communities around the state.
- Funds staff at the Department of Health Services - Oral Health Program

Kids Forward strongly supports this broad effort to increase access to dental services in Wisconsin. Wisconsin ranks worst in the nation for access of children on Medicaid to dental care. Numerous studies have shown the correlation between oral health and overall health. Kids can't concentrate in school if they are in pain because of unmet dental needs, and lower-income children are less likely to get needed care.

According to the Department of Health Services, nearly one in four preschoolers in Head Start programs had untreated tooth decay. In 2016, less than one out of three children on Medicaid received any dental care. This is unacceptable.

Notably, lack of access to dental care disproportionately impacts communities of color and Native American people living on reservations. According to the Department of Health Services, one in three Asian, Black, or Hispanic third-grade children had untreated tooth decay, compared to one in six White children. High school students face similar racial disparities in access. State data on dental access among ninth graders show that in 2015 almost 38% of non-Hispanic Black students did not see a dentist or dental hygienist, compared to 33% of Hispanic students and 14% of non-Hispanic white students.

Due to institutional racism and systemic inequity, communities of color are more likely to face structural and systemic barriers to accessing dental care, such as affordability, adequate transportation, and availability of local providers. This disparity continues into adulthood.

Increasing funding for providers serving Medicaid patients in both urban and rural communities, allowing dental therapists to perform routine procedures, increasing capacity for programs that provide in-school services are all promising steps that will likely result in more people being able to access the dental care they need. Consequently, more children will be able to thrive in their environments pain-free.

We hope that these measures are adopted as part of the governor's proposed budget.

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Kids Forward, formerly the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.