

**NJ Oral Health Coalition**  
**January 19, 2011**

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Sidney Whitman for the invitation to be part of today's program. And thank all of you for taking time to be here today.

New Jersey's Oral Health Coalition does tremendous work in promoting access to oral health care in our state.

Oral Health

There are many health issues facing our residents and much of our attention is focused on the leading causes of death and disability, such as heart disease, cancer and stroke. Many times the subject of oral health doesn't get the attention it deserves.

When we look at health care policy and at everything that must be done to protect the public's health, unfortunately issues like oral health can be overlooked and health ramifications of the issue go unaddressed. That is why I am pleased to be here today to join those of you who are focused on bringing greater attention to this issue and ensuring that all New Jerseyans get the dental care they need.

As Commissioner of the Health, when I travel around the state one of the most important messages that I stress to the residents I speak with is the importance of regular and preventive care. A critical element to preventive care is regular oral health care.

As most people here know, there is an ever-increasing body of medical evidence that suggests significant links between poor oral health and the development of many different diseases.

And while in some cases it may not be clear if the disease is affecting oral health, or if poor oral health habits are causing the disease - we know that links do exist.

According to the American Academy of Periodontology, people with periodontal disease are almost twice as likely to have coronary artery disease. And one study found that the presence of common problems in the mouth, including gingivitis, cavities, and missing teeth, were as good at predicting heart disease as cholesterol levels.

A recent study published in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association* found that people who had higher blood levels of certain disease-causing bacteria in the mouth were more likely to have atherosclerosis in the carotid artery in the neck.

Additionally, the Journal of the National Cancer Institute, in 2007, published a study that found men with a history of periodontal disease had a 64 percent increased risk of pancreatic cancer.

Clearly, the importance of maintaining good oral health is critical and cannot be overstated.

I am proud to say that the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services has not overlooked oral health as part of our overall strategy to protect the public.

In fact, the Department's Children's Oral Health Education Program has almost 30 years of successful history providing oral health and hygiene instruction to school age children throughout the state especially in areas of high need. The Children's Oral Health Education Program provides a variety of educational activities in the classroom to teach kids about oral health and also provides screening and referrals to dental care if necessary.

Through this program, the Department has reached thousands upon thousands of children and adults. Working with our community partners, we have also targeted education, instruction and referral to dental services to clients throughout the state who receive WIC services, pregnant women, and hard-to-reach populations. For example, working with the Dental Hygienists Association we began the "Homeless Shelter Oral Health Initiative" in 2008, which has resulted in more than 500 homeless individuals receiving oral health personal care resources, oral health and hygiene education and referral for dental care services.

Additionally, the Department has worked with the Federally Qualified Health Centers to expand access to dental care in our state. Over the years our partners at community health centers have greatly expanded sites for oral health care. Of the 94 sites in the state, 50 are providing dental services on site and 2 mobile vans are providing dental services to school-based programs and senior centers. One of the FQHCs I recently visited, Zufall Health Center, has plans to provide comprehensive dental services in Hunterdon County later this year.

This increasing access has thankfully resulted in more patient visits to community health centers for dental care. In fiscal year 2005, there were about 108,000 visits and in fiscal year 2010, that number has risen to more than 214,000 visits. At the Department, we are happy to support our community health centers in delivering that care. Just in 2010, the Department reimbursed FQHCs more than \$11 million for dental care. This collaboration has ensured a dental health safety net for residents.

All the improvements that New Jersey has made in oral health have been a result of the strong partnerships we have built. Today is another step forward in advancing the collaborative initiatives that will ensure all residents receive the dental care they need.

Thank you all for your efforts to improve oral health in our state.