



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DAVID Y. IGE
GOVERNOR

VIRGINIA PRESSLER, M.D.
DIRECTOR

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Hawaii State Department of Health leads oral health screening initiative for every Head Start and Early Head Start student

Grants from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the HDS Foundation enable earlier oral health intervention

HONOLULU – The Hawaii Department of Health (DOH), in collaboration with the Hawaii Children’s Action Network, Head Start Collaboration Office, and Hawaii Head Start and Early Head Start programs, is conducting a statewide oral health screening project, beginning this fall. The project, which focuses on Hawaii keiki who are most at risk for cavities, builds upon the foundation set by the DOH’s *Hawaii Smiles* statewide third-grade screening project two years ago. The current project will look at younger children and include an oral health screening for every child enrolled in the Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

The first screening is scheduled at the Parents and Children Together (PACT) headquarters at The Towers at Kuhio Park on Tuesday, Oct. 17, beginning at 10 am. Altogether, more than 2,970 children at more than 100 Head Start and Early Head Start sites statewide will have a dental screening in this school year. The health department will use this data on the oral health of these young children to inform the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and develop policies and programs to improve the oral health of children across Hawaii.

The *Hawaii Smiles* statewide screening team is composed of dentists and dental hygienists from the public and private sectors who will evaluate the extent of cavities in these children, provide oral health educational materials for parents and teachers, and offer recommendations for follow-up dental care.

“This project will allow us to better understand the patterns that surround dental decay in families and communities in our state,” said Dr. Gavin Uchida, DOH dental director. “On a

community level, we know we must all do much more to improve the oral health of the residents of our state, and this information is foundational in helping us create the smartest, most effective plans for positive change.”

Previously, DOH issued the 2015/2016 *Hawaii Smiles* report, which validated that Hawaii’s third grade children have the highest prevalence of tooth decay in the nation. The baseline results were based on data collected from more than 3,000 third grade students in 67 public elementary schools during the 2014-2015 school year.

The findings from the *Hawaii Smiles* report were disappointing, but not surprising:

- 71 percent of third graders in Hawaii have tooth decay, which is higher than the national average of 52 percent;
- 22 percent of third graders have untreated tooth decay, indicating they are not receiving dental care;
- About 7 percent of third graders are in need of urgent dental care because of pain or infection; and
- There are significant oral health disparities by income as well as by race/ethnicity among third grade students in Hawaii.

“We are grateful that the HDS Foundation is being proactive and funding early solutions to Hawaii’s oral health problems,” said Deborah Zysman, executive director of the Hawaii Children’s Action Network. “These problems are often preventable when addressed in early childhood through screening, public education and outreach, and public policy. We are excited for the opportunity to make a difference in the health of Hawaii children.”

As part of the outreach efforts, parents and teachers will receive oral health educational materials and classroom supplies to reinforce the importance of good oral health to children.

The *Hawaii Smiles* report recommended community-based prevention programs that focus on oral health promotion and prevention services in early childhood programs to reach children at a younger age. The Early Head Start and Head Start programs were identified because of their extensive reach to children from birth to five years old.

“While this project is organized by the Department of Health, it actually is a growing coalition of local and national community partners who are taking action,” said Dr. Uchida. “We’re seeing the result of partnerships that start with caring individuals and small community groups, and extends to local businesses and associations, and even to national leadership at the CDC. A lot

of people are now coming together to address the oral health problems we're seeing in Hawaii, and this current project is just the beginning of good things to come."

"We're pleased to be able to continue our support for the Hawaii Smiles project," said Mark Yamakawa, president and CEO of Hawaii Dental Service (HDS). "Prevention is the key to good oral health especially for our young children, and we appreciate the collaborative effort to tackle this important issue in our state."

The CDC awarded the DOH a \$1.1 million grant to rebuild its oral health program, a portion of which is being used for these oral health screenings for 1,450 children at 50 Head Start and Early Head Start sites throughout the state.

The HDS Foundation gave a \$45,000 grant to the Hawaii Children's Action Network, which is helping to coordinate the logistics of this project, to expand the outreach efforts to an additional 59 sites and to conduct dental screenings for an additional 1,520 infants, toddlers and preschoolers for a total of more than 2,970 children.

Children will be referred to their dentist for follow-up care. If they do not have a dentist, the DOH and the Head Start and Early Head Start programs will refer families to Community Case Management Corp., which assists Medicaid beneficiaries with finding dentists for treatment.

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About the Head Start Program and Early Head Start Program

Head Start (3-4 year olds) and Early Head Start (pregnant women, infants and toddlers) are federally-funded programs that prepare eligible infants, toddlers and preschoolers for school readiness and enhance the lives of their families by offering a two-generational service delivery model that includes comprehensive child development and family support services. The program started as a pilot in 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty Program, and has become the largest early childhood program in Hawaii.