

## Chairman Dingell, Subcommittee on Health hearing entitled "Insuring Bright Futures: Improving Access to Dental Care and Providing a Healthy Start for Children"

Statement of Congressman John D. Dingell, Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
HEARING ENTITLED "INSURING BRIGHT FUTURES: IMPROVING ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE AND PROVIDING A  
HEALTHY START FOR CHILDREN"  
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Today's hearing will focus on providing a healthy start for children. It is common sense that keeping children healthy and treating illness early is a wise investment. Children who are healthy do better in school. They are at lower risk for developmental problems. And their future healthcare costs are likely to be less.

Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) provide the health insurance and a healthy start for nearly a quarter of U.S. children. These two programs are primarily responsible for preventing these children from joining the increasing number of those who are uninsured. Our nation has made good progress in getting children immunized against disease, but progress has been slower on dental care and mental health care. Clearly more needs to be done.

Medicaid's coverage of dental and mental health benefits is exemplary. And many States meet Medicaid's standard of coverage under SCHIP, as well. But many do not. And that means many children still have unmet needs in these two areas.

Dental disease is the most common childhood disease – more prevalent than asthma and diabetes. It is also the most easily prevented. Proper care, however, must start in infancy, including oral checkups, preventive care, sealants, fluoride, and at home oral care.

If left untreated, however, dental disease can be deadly. Sadly, the Nation learned this recently from the much-publicized case of a 12-year-old child from Maryland named Deamonte Driver. In Mississippi, there was recently an equally tragic and equally preventable death that would have been prevented if action had been taken sooner. Six-year-old Alexander Callendar died due to untreated dental disease.

The need for action exists on several levels. The Congress has a role to play in ensuring States have sufficient resources in Medicaid and SCHIP to address the unmet dental need among children. The Federal Government needs take steps to prevent future tragedies from occurring. We need to play a role in training and education of dentists. And we have a role to play in ensuring access in all communities.

I will soon introduce a bipartisan bill that will move us forward toward addressing many of these issues. I hope that my colleagues on the Committee will join me in cosponsoring this legislation. It should be a national priority.

Likewise, children's mental health care is also a significant challenge for families, especially the uninsured or under-insured. Private insurance coverage is limited or inadequate for those with the greatest need. Under Medicaid and SCHIP we need to do more to make community-based mental health care an option. There are more than 12,000 children across the country who are on waiting lists because existing programs lack space. In addition, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has recently initiated efforts that would restrict or even eliminate States' ability to manage the care of children with the most severe mental illnesses. We need to be assisting children and States in this area, not further restricting access for children to receive needed care. CMS's actions are unacceptable and this is something we will explore in the near future.

I thank Chairman Pallone for this hearing. It is timely. It is necessary. I look forward to working with my colleagues on these important health priorities.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce  
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