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New Study of Children's Health Initiatives in Three Counties Shows Dramatic Gains in Children's Dental Health Care

Evaluations in Los Angeles, San Mateo, and Santa Clara Counties show improved access and use of dental care with children's health insurance programs; unmet need declines

Los Angeles, CA – New data released today showed that Healthy Kids programs, locally-funded county-based health insurance programs for children, produced consistent and dramatic gains in children's access and use of dental care. The impact of Healthy Kids on children includes not only sharp gains in the use of preventative dental services, but also dramatic gains in the treatment of dental problems that can have significant, harmful effects on children's health and schooling if left untreated. The study compiled data from evaluations of Healthy Kids programs in Los Angeles and San Mateo Counties and compared the results with previously released findings from Santa Clara County's program.

“The results of this study are dramatic. The significant gains in both access to and use of dental care among kids enrolled in Healthy Kids program demonstrates the large impact that providing health insurance coverage to kids can have on children's health” said Chris Trenholm, associate director of research at Mathematica Policy Research, a co-author of the report.

Prior to enrolling in Healthy Kids, few of these children had coverage for dental services, placing them at long-term risk for poor oral health and limiting their use of key services as routine dental check-ups and treatment. Dental disease is highly prevalent in California – 54 percent of kindergartners and 71 percent of third graders have a history of tooth decay, and 28 percent of children in both grades have untreated tooth decay.

The following is a summary of the main findings of the report on children's dental health care:

Access to dental care improves with enrollment in Healthy Kids:

- In Los Angeles County, the proportion of children with a usual source of dental care increased from 42 before enrolling in Healthy Kids to 74 percent with enrollment in Healthy Kids.
- In San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, the proportion of children with a usual source of dental care more than doubled, reaching over 80 percent as a result of the coverage.
- The proportion of children with a dental visit in the past six months dramatically improved in both counties where this indicator was measured (San Mateo and Santa Clara); from 25 percent to 60 percent with enrollment in Healthy Kids.
- The proportion of children who received a dental treatment in the past six months nearly tripled with Healthy Kids coverage – from about 15 to 45 percent in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

“Given that dental disease is the most common chronic childhood disease, dental coverage is a powerful tool for relieving immediate suffering and improving children’s health and well-being” said Jacque McLaughlin, co-chair for California’s Children’s Health Initiatives, which includes Children’s Health Initiatives in Santa Clara, San Mateo and Los Angeles Counties among its members.

Healthy Kids programs provide comprehensive insurance coverage for dental care (along with coverage for other types of health care) to children in low- to moderate-income families who are otherwise unable to access affordable coverage. Three of the largest programs – in Los Angeles, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties – currently provide insurance coverage to about 60,000 children.

In addition to improving children’s access to dental care, Healthy Kids has consistently proven to improve access and use of medical care among kids enrolled in the program. A study released last November compared the medical care experiences of children enrolled in Healthy Kids for at least a year with the experiences of new enrollees prior to obtaining coverage. The report found that access to medical care among children enrolled in Healthy Kids for a year rose significantly – reaching about 90 percent in each of the three counties – when compared to similar children without Healthy Kids coverage. There were additionally dramatic drops in unmet healthcare needs and an increase of parents reporting being “very confident” that their children could obtain needed care.

“Taken together these results prove that small investments in children’s dental and medical care coverage can lead to dramatic gains in access to and use of both medical and dental care, which are crucial contributors to children’s overall well-being and health” said Dr. Gene Lewit of the Packard Foundation. “Santa Clara, San Mateo and Los Angeles Counties have built a remarkable model for how kids can be covered. This model has transformed how California and the nation think about covering all kids.”

The three on-going evaluations are being conducted by the Mathematica Policy Research, the Urban Institute and the University of California, San Francisco. The issue brief reporting the new findings was funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

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Since 2001, Children’s Health Initiatives (CHI) coalitions have emerged in 30 of California’s 58 counties to design and implement innovative programs to expand health insurance coverage for children. These initiatives typically have two parts: a new insurance product—called Healthy Kids—that covers children who are ineligible for Medi-Cal and Healthy Families because of their immigration status or because their family income is too high; and comprehensive outreach campaign that find and assist families with enrolling children into any available program. Healthy Kids programs in these 30 counties, whose collective populations account for nearly three quarters of all uninsured children in the state, currently provide more than 85,000 children with comprehensive health insurance coverage (Stevens, Rice and Cousineau 2007).

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