

A “BIG DAY” FOR THE ORAL HEALTH OF ALABAMIANS

By Richard A. Simpson, DMD

On Thursday, November 9, 2017, a gathering of key stakeholders involved in the care and improvement of the oral health of Alabama’s citizens resulted in the initial draft of a five-year State Oral Health Plan (SOHP) for Alabama. The work group meeting was hosted by the Oral Health Coalition of Alabama, in conjunction with the Dental Section of the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH).

Invited members and staff addressed primary goals in five key areas that included: (1) increased access to oral health care; (2) professional education and integration; (3) health literacy; (4) data and surveillance; and (5) prevention. Objectives of this plan seek to reduce the incidence of oral disease and suffering; improve access for underserved and hard to reach populations including those in rural areas; increase perinatal oral health care; educate health care providers, policy makers, and consumers on the integral importance of good oral health for overall health; increase interprofessional education, training, and collaboration in oral health as part of comprehensive health care; and, decrease health disparities and barriers for older adults and those with special needs. The draft of the 2018-2023 SOHP will be reviewed and edited by work group members and the ADPH over the next several weeks, with a goal of completion by the end of this year.

The initial impetus for the development of a SOHP for Alabama was the 2016 State of Decay Report, Volume III, by Oral Health America and the Wisdom Tooth Project. This report is a state-by-state report of the oral health of the country’s 65+ population. In this report, which addressed five measures, Alabama found itself ranked number 50. Two key reasons for this were the lack of the existence of a Basic Screening Survey (BSS) of older adults, and no written SOHP with SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). Through the recent efforts of the UAB School of Dentistry, a regional BSS has already been conducted, and plans are well on their way to complete a statewide BSS within the next 12 months. With regards to a SOHP, the Alabama Department of Public Health and the Oral Health Coalition of Alabama recognized this as an opportunity to not only improve our ranking in the next State of Decay Report, but more importantly, to develop a comprehensive plan that would provide a framework of goals, objectives, and action items that could impact the oral health of Alabamians of all age groups for years to come.

The Oral Health Coalition of Alabama (OHCA), which meets quarterly, is an organization made up of volunteer stakeholder members from Alabama that include dental and medical professional organizations, educators, the UAB School of Dentistry, state agencies, non-profits, community service organizations, federally-qualified health centers (FQHC), public health experts, and others. The mission of the coalition is “To promote quality oral health care which impacts the overall health and well-being of Alabama residents through collaborative partnerships, education, advocacy, and technology.” Logistical support is provided through the Oral Health Branch of the ADPH.

The coalition, and its invited members, were honored to serve in an advisory capacity to assist the Alabama Department of Public Health in developing their State Oral Health Plan.

Attendees at this historic session were as follows:

Richard Simpson – OHCA Chair/ AL Academy of Pediatric Dentistry/ AL Chapter AAP

Patsy Lockwood – Retired principal/special education teacher - Moderator

Laney Beckweth – Gadsden FQHC

Cathy Caldwell – ALL Kids Director

Conan Davis – UAB School of Dentistry

Summer Gagnon – ADPH

Sherry Goode – ADPH

Beth Huckabee – Medicaid Dental Program Director

Tommy Johnson – Dental Director ADPH

Christine King – Policy Director, Sarrell/DentaQuest

Stuart Lockwood – Retired dentist/public health and data expert

Lillian Mitchell – UAB School of Dentistry

Steve Mitchell – UAB School of Dentistry/AL Academy of Pediatric Dentistry Public Policy

Danny Rush – Medicaid Dental Consultant

Zack Studstill – ALDA Executive Director

Michele Waren – ALDA Associate Executive Director

Dr Simpson is a member of the Alabama Dental Association, and a pediatric dentist with Children and Teen Dental Group of Alabama. He practices in Tuscaloosa.