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To Whom It May Concern:

It has come to my attention that the Early Smiles Program and the navigation services through Liberty Dental and the Medi-Cal dental managed care system in Sacramento County is in jeopardy. As a social worker and program manager of 30 years in the Elk Grove Unified School District, I feel compelled to speak out about the importance of maintaining the robust early education, navigation, and managed dental care programs in our area. The Early Smiles program and navigation support from Liberty Dental promote awareness of and access to quality dental services for our most vulnerable children and families. I know that statistics are important indicators of how services are being used, but in the case of dental and oral health, I have to ask if we have given the community enough time to learn and engage.

The parents and guardians in Sacramento County are among the most diverse in the United States. Our low-income families who have health insurance through Medi-Cal have often grown up themselves not having access to regular dental care. For many, dental services were sought only in a dental crisis and the care was challenging to access. We are also a refugee destination for many newcomers. Lack of experience with early dental care, language barriers, and challenges navigating the system create barriers to access. We now have early education, navigation, and managed care options for our families. Early Smiles provides education, screenings, and fluoride varnish to our Title I low income school children. Liberty Dental provides navigation support to families of children with caries and other oral health issues. These services increase awareness and assure families can access care, address referral issues, and change providers when needed.

We know that addressing issues such as caries, abscesses, inflammation, and other infections of the mouth that cause chronic pain and illness is critical for our children and youth. Missed days and lost attention due to illness and chronic pain create a barrier to the learning and development of our children. Education lost, especially in the youngest years due to missed opportunities and lack of engagement create not only a tremendous loss to the child, but to that child's ultimate productivity in our economy.

Just as we are getting our systems in place to assist our families, the plan is to take it all away and shroud dental care in a new level of mystery and remoteness. Another generation of children and adults will become discouraged and relegate their dental and oral health to the back seat of their personal health care perspective. This ultimately will result in more costs for health care and to our society in general as our children are at risk, in pain, and vulnerable to infection.

I recommend we continue with the comprehensive service delivery plan we currently have in Sacramento County, including Early Smiles and Liberty Dental navigation, and give it time to shift the perspective of Medi-Cal clients toward accessing regular dental care and treatment. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

Florence Oneto, LCSW, PPS
Program Specialist / Homeless Education Liaison
Student Support Centers
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