

TESTIMONY OF SENATOR DELORES G. KELLEY

REGARDING SENATE BILL 511-TASK FORCE ON ORAL HEALTH IN MARYLAND

BEFORE THE HOUSE HEALTH AND GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

ON TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2020

Madam Chair and Members:

It has been almost 13 years since Maryland tragically lost one of its youngest citizens to a bacterial infection that started in a tooth. Since the death of this young Marylander we have been on a quest to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen again. The good news is that in Maryland we've made some of the most dramatic and positive changes in the country. Maryland children are seeing dentists at higher rates than ever. In fact, Maryland has one of the highest percentages of children seeing a dentist in the country. According to the 2017 Annual Oral Health Legislative Report, less than 1 percent of children who were

enrolled in our children's Medicaid program had to be seen in an emergency room for a dental issue. This means better care for the patients and fiscal savings for the state.

The progress our State made is due, in large part, to the commitment we made to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services for children and to ensure that every Maryland child enrolled in the Healthy Smiles program has a dental home the minute they receive their enrollment card. While there has been substantial progress in ensuring that our youngest have good oral health care, we need to find ways to increase the dental health of our children and we need to give an equal amount of attention to boost the oral health of our vulnerable adult populations.

In 2018 the Maryland General Assembly took a step in the right direction by passing a pilot program to provide adult dental Medicaid benefits to certain adults. Now, it's time to support legislation that will help us get to the bottom of why people may fall through the cracks and not receive oral health care. It's hard

not to ignore this problem when you consider that 15 Maryland adults died of dental cellulitis in our hospitals between 2013 and 2016.

SB 511 will create a task force that would perform an extensive study of the barriers to dental care. The task force is to be composed of members of the oral health community, led by the Dean of the University of Maryland School of Dentistry and the Deputy Secretary of Public Health Services. It is to be a comprehensive two-year study to identify the people not receiving dental care and what the barriers are that prevent them from receiving dental care. It is to analyze the impact of the barriers, to identify solutions to those barriers, and to report recommendations to General Assembly in a final report by Dec. 1, 2021.

If we understand the access to care issues facing our fellow citizens, issues such as lack of child care, costs, transportation, language and cultural factors we can better treat the dental diseases facing these populations, and not merely the symptoms of the disease with pain killers and opiates. Getting people into regular care with a dentist can help keep people out of the emergency room, keep people

healthy, and keep our fiscal house in line. The type of thorough analyses under SB 511 is absolutely critical to help us understand the barriers to care so we can ensure that all Marylanders receive the best care dentistry can provide.

SB 511 passed the Committee and the full Senate unanimously. In light of these considerations, I ask for a favorable report.