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Funds sought to add children's dental care

- By [SARAH CHACKO](#)
- Advocate Capitol News Bureau
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Requests to allocate more money to dental care for poor residents and nurse partnerships for first-time mothers came before state legislators during a budget subcommittee meeting Wednesday.

Another group advocating independent living programs for disabled residents asked that legislators maintain funding levels without cuts.

Dentists asked the House Appropriations Health and Human Services subcommittee for:

- \$60,000 to keep a program that provides free dental care to elderly and handicap residents going.

Dr. Ray Unland, a dentist working with the national Donated Dental Services program, said Louisiana dentists donated about \$655,000 in treatment to nearly 300 residents last year.

- Full Medicare coverage for dental exams and extractions, not just the adult dentures covered now.
- \$15 million to provide services to children who are eligible for Medicaid, the federal health insurance program for low-income families.

Donaldson said there were about 400,000 Medicaid-eligible children who did not see a dentist last year.

Sandra Adams, former director of the Louisiana Maternal and Child Health Coalition, also asked for a \$1.2 million state allocation to cover paint-on fluoride varnish for Medicaid-eligible children.

Medicaid only covers the procedure when done by dentists. But 29 other states allow the procedure to be done by non-dentists, she said. The state money would be matched by \$4.3 million in federal dollars and could expand the program to 75 percent of the eligible children, she said.

Legislators also heard testimony on funding legislation enacted last year that would fluoridate the water in communities with at least 5,000 service connections.

Dionne Richardson, the state Office of Public Health's oral health director, said estimates for the fluoridation are still coming in from eligible communities. But based on similar programs, it costs about \$50,000 to \$60,000 per injection point, which is where the fluoridation is put into the water system, she said.

Some water systems will have multiple injection points, Richardson said. For example, Baton Rouge, one of the largest water systems, has about 27 injection points.

Other health funding requests included one by Louisiana Maternal and Child Health Coalition's new director Berkley Durbin to increase funding for a Nurse-Family Partnership, which places nurses with first-time, Medicaid-eligible mothers.

The partnership is proven to reduce child abuse, increase workforce readiness and educational interest among the mothers, and reinforces the importance of pregnancy spacing, she said.

An additional \$2.5 million a year for five years to the program would allow for 50 percent of the eligible mothers now to be served, Durbin said. Now, about 15 percent of eligible mothers are served, she said.

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