

# 20 dentists to join in Give Kids a Smile Day

By RICK GUINNESS  
HERALD STAFF

**NEW BRITAIN** — As part of a national charity program to fix poor children's teeth, 20 area dentists will provide care to 200 city kids, officials said Wednesday at the annual kickoff ceremony for Give Kids a Smile Day.

Since its inception six years ago, the program has grown every year, dentists at the event said, which illustrates the strong commitment on the part of providers — but also the lack of funding that caused the problem in the first place.

Smile Day, which has seen 758,000 poor children treated nationwide by some 39,000 dental team volunteers and 14,400 dentists, does not solve the problem of underinsured or uninsured children and their dental health.

"There are not enough providers who are willing to see them on an ongoing basis," said pediatric dentist Dr. W. Fred Thal, of the New Britain Oral Health Collaborative.

"This is largely because of inadequate reimbursement from the Husky plan," he said, referring to the state's subsidized Healthcare for Uninsured Kids and Youth program.

In New Britain, the "give kids a smile day" work will take place Feb. 8, although the actual smile day created by the American Dental Association in 2002, is Feb. 1.

Kids who can take part in the program will be notified by schools, said Michael Trueworthy, Democratic majority leader of the city's Common Council.



Submitted photo

## City officials and area dentists meet for the kick-off event of Give Kids a Smile.

In a proclamation, Mayor Timothy Stewart said "The New Britain event has in the past been among the largest in the state, featuring dentists from Plainville, Berlin, New Britain and Kensington who provide free dental care to children throughout the day."

Thal, who works at the Pediatric Dentistry practice at 1 Lake St., said Wednesday's announcement was a media event designed to raise awareness. "The 2007 state legislature appropriated \$20 million for each

of the next two years to attract more dentists" to work with children in the Husky plan, Thal said. "But unfortunately, that money has not been released."

Mark Masselli, president and chief executive of Community Health Center Inc., said there are some 300,000 people on Medicaid statewide, but that dentists are getting about the same amount of reimbursement for treating them as they did two decades ago.

A class-action lawsuit against the state by the Hartford Legal Aid Society to improve funding

for reimbursement for providers "has been resolved in principle," Thal said, but "the parties have not signed off on it."

Reached for comment late Wednesday, a spokesman for Gov. M. Jodi Rell said "oral health has long been a neglected epidemic," but that his boss is doing something about it.

"An unprecedented amount of new resources has been approved which will improve access to care for Husky recipients," Rell spokesman Adam Liegeot said. "The administration is work-

ing to implement the dental rate increases the governor and legislature agreed upon.

While progress is being made in increasing access to dental care, this is not an issue that can be solely measured in terms of dollars and cents. The state is now looking at ways to improve recruitment of providers, raise public awareness about dental health and create incentives for dentists to get into the program."

Most of the speakers at the kickoff said it is about dollars and cents, however, because it takes money to pay the overhead costs of running a dental practice.

"Where's the \$20 million?" said Marty Mikovich, executive director of the Connecticut Oral Health Initiative. "I would like to encourage our state reps to move this along. Nothing has been done to get that money out so these kids can be served."

Trueworthy pointed out that dental problems are the No. 1 reason children visit emergency rooms.

Nationally some 25 percent of all children rely on Medicaid for their health insurance, but in New Britain it's 60 percent, according to a handout distributed by Thal.

On a positive note, Superintendent of Schools Doris Kurtz said the city has benefited from the advent of portable dental units used to conduct dental checkups at the schools.

"I believe it is a moral and ethical issue (to provide dental care) and not let children suffer because their parents lack money," Kurtz said. "Working with kids' minds and bodies are two of the greatest professions in the world."