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Speak Up for Children's Oral Health during Oral Cancer Awareness Week

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A community functions well when its residents have access to essential services—from electricity and transportation, to education and health care. To foster the development of the next generation, Massachusetts must have systems in place to keep all of its residents healthy from head to toe. This means that we need to ensure that we have connected the mouth to the body and are including oral health care in our health care system.

The mouth is the gateway to the rest of the body. Surgeon General David Satcher said it best when he stated that: "Oral health is a critical component of health and must be included in the provision of health care and the design of community programs." Yet Massachusetts still has a long way to go when it comes to improving oral health. Today, thousands of children in the Commonwealth still suffer from the most common chronic childhood disease: dental decay. Nationally, 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental disease. If we want our children to grow up to be productive workers and contributing members of the community, we must provide them with access to the services that keep our communities strong and healthy, including high-quality dental care.

Dental decay is a bacterial infection of the mouth which has long term consequences on our health. Poor oral health has been associated with increased risk for heart disease, diabetes and even oral cancer. The connections between oral disease and oral cancer are well documented. When oral health is compromised, one's overall health and well-being also suffers. Fortunately, dental disease is almost entirely preventable when public health measures are widely available.

It's time to tackle this issue with proven solutions that benefit the health of Burlington residents. To slow the incidence of dental decay and associated disease such as oral cancer, we must work together to ensure that public health programs provide children and families access to school and community-based dental clinics. These programs deliver important preventive services such as oral screenings, dental sealants that cover and protect the teeth from disease, and fluoride treatments that make tooth enamel stronger and more resistant to decay.

As the Director of Burlington's Board of Health, I work to ensure that public health is a top community priority. Providing oral health care as part of a child's physical development is essential to fostering a child's ability to learn and advance in life. At the statewide level, a number of groups have joined together to advance solutions to our children's oral health needs through the Watch Your Mouth Coalition. The Burlington community can be a part of the solution by joining this coalition and speaking up for children's oral health.

In honor of Oral Cancer Awareness Week, I urge residents of Burlington to keep our communities free of dental disease by asking your lawmakers to make oral health programs a top policy priority. When we make a commitment to fund oral health programs, we connect kids to opportunities for a healthy future.

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