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TeethFirst! Initiative Highlights the Importance of Early Dental Visits for Rhode Island Children

Initiative promotes dental visits by age 1 for RI children

Campaign website, www.TeethFirstRI.org, is a comprehensive resource for parent and families, dental providers, health care providers, and community organizations

TeethFirst! Academy created by the faculty at the St. Joseph Health Services Pediatric & Family Dental Center offers free continuing education for dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants to increase the number of dental providers who treat very young children in RI

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**Providence, RI, September 11, 2013** – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Rhode Island Oral Health Commission launched the TeethFirst! initiative at a policy forum held at the Providence Marriott Downtown from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, September 11, 2013. The TeethFirst! initiative promotes dental visits by one year of age and is a resource for Rhode Island parents and families, dental providers, health care providers, and community organizations that serve families of young children. The initiative’s accompanying website ([www.TeethFirstRI.org](http://www.TeethFirstRI.org)) and all resources for families and community organizations are also available in Spanish ([www.PrimerLosDientesRI.org](http://www.PrimerLosDientesRI.org)).

TeethFirst! was introduced to more than 60 policymakers, community leaders, and dental providers at a special release as part of a quarterly meeting of the Rhode Island Oral Health Commission. The Commission is comprised of policymakers, oral health providers and community leaders with the mission of formulating and promoting sound oral health policy, increasing awareness of oral health issues, and assisting in the promotion of initiatives for the prevention and control of oral diseases.

“We know that early dental visits put our children on a path to healthy smiles for a lifetime,” said Lt. Governor Roberts. “We can avoid future dental problems with simple checkups starting at age one. The sooner we can connect babies and families with a dentist, the better.”

TeethFirst! provides the following targeted information and resources:

### *For Parents and Families*

- Encourages parents and families to take their children for early dental visits
- Explains dental coverage and how to find a dentist
- Identifies dental providers who will care for their children

*For Dental Providers*

- Provides professional development opportunities for dental providers, including free Continuing Education through the *TeethFirst! Academy*
- Enhances provider knowledge, skills, and comfort with treating very young children
- Creates a peer learning network among dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants

*For Health Care Providers*

- Educates health care providers about the importance of oral health
- Shares resources to build skills in talking about oral health with their patients
- Informs health care providers about how to refer their patients to a dental home

*For Community Organizations (WIC, Early Head Start/Head Start, Child Care Providers, etc.)*

- Educates community organizations that serve families about the importance of oral health
- Shares resources about oral health for staff and families
- Informs staff about how to refer families to a dental home

“We’ve reached out to pediatricians and community organizations that serve families of very young children, such as WIC, child care providers, home visitors, and many others, to help them join us in encouraging families to get their babies in for early dental visits,” stated Jill Beckwith, Deputy Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Project Director of the TeethFirst! initiative.

TeethFirst! aims to build the current network of dental providers treating very young children by increasing the number of providers who are skilled in and comfortable with treating infants and toddlers. The new *TeethFirst! Academy*, developed and offered by the faculty at the St. Joseph Health Services Pediatric & Family Dental Center, is a professional development opportunity open to teams of dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants from private practice and safety net sites throughout Rhode Island.

“Today’s event marks the beginning of an important campaign to promote early dental visits. We will continue to build the dental network and expand available resources for families. It takes a community working together to keep our littlest ones healthy and we look forward to continuing this exciting work with oral health advocates throughout the state. Good health is linked to all other positive outcomes for children in Rhode Island,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

The TeethFirst! initiative is supported by grant funding from the DentaQuest Foundation’s Oral Health 2014 Initiative, with matching funds from Delta Dental of Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Department of Health. TeethFirst! involves a collaborative Leadership Team comprised of representatives from the American Academy of Pediatrics (RI Chapter), Delta Dental of Rhode Island, Medicaid-CHIP State Dental Association, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, RI Dental Association, RI Dental Hygienists’ Association, RI Dental Assistants Association, RI Department of Health’s Oral Health Program, RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services/Medicaid, RI Health Center Association, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, St. Joseph Pediatric Dental Center, Samuels Sinclair Dental Center at Rhode Island Hospital, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan, UnitedHealthcare Dental/RIte Smiles, and WIC.

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*Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, education, safety and development of Rhode Island’s children.*