



Health Consumer Alliance **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**
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Health Consumer Alliance
Partners

CONSUMER CENTERS

FRESNO COUNTY:

Fresno Health Consumer Center
Central California Legal Services, Inc.
2014 Tulare Street, Suite 502
Fresno, CA 93721-2011
800.300.1277

LOS ANGELES COUNTY:

Health Consumer Center of
Los Angeles
Neighborhood Legal Services of
Los Angeles County
13327 Van Nuys Boulevard
Pacoima, CA 91331-3099
800.896.3203

ORANGE COUNTY:

Orange County Health Consumer
Action Center
Legal Aid Society of Orange County
902 North Main Street
Santa Ana, CA 92701-3507
800.834.5001

SAN DIEGO COUNTY:

Consumer Center for Health
Education and Advocacy
Legal Aid Society of San Diego
1475 Sixth Avenue, Fourth Floor
San Diego, CA 92101-3245
877.734.3258 (877.SDHEALTH)
(toll free)

SAN FRANCISCO COUNTY:

Community Health Advocacy
Project
Bay Area Legal Aid
50 Fell Street, First Floor
San Francisco, CA 94102-5298
800.551.5554

SAN MATEO COUNTY:

Health Consumer Center of
San Mateo County
Legal Aid Society of San Mateo
County
521 East Fifth Avenue
San Mateo, CA 94402-1302
800.381.8898

Lead Agency:

National Health Law Program
2639 South La Cienega Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90034-2675
310-204-6010

State Support:

Western Center on Law and
Poverty
3701 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 208
Los Angeles, CA 90010-2809
213-487-7211

Report shows consumers' difficulty accessing dental services in California's Medi-Cal program

Expert help identifies problems, helps consumers get services

Los Angeles, CA — January 16, 2003 — A report released today found that hundreds of low-income consumers are frequently denied medically necessary dental care that should be covered under California's Medi-Cal program. Today's report found that even though these consumers have health coverage through Medi-Cal, they still face formidable barriers to dental care and have serious unmet dental needs.

The report, *Denti-Cal Denied: Consumers' Experiences Accessing Dental Services in California's Medi-Cal Program*, made the following findings, among others:

- The California Department of Health Services does not abide by federal law in guaranteeing access to oral health services, particularly preventive dental care, for children.
- Medi-Cal beneficiaries who do not speak English often are unable to communicate with their providers due to lack of interpreters at the dentist offices and within the dental HMOs.
- Consumers rely on their dentists for referrals and authorizations for treatment but because providers are misinformed about which dental services are provided under Medi-Cal, covered treatments often are not requested.
- Requests for treatment do not appear to be considered adequately by the Department of Health Services and are denied for illogical reasons such as asking for documentation that has been provided or because the provider did not sign the form correctly.
- The California Department of Health Services' interpretation of covered benefits is more restrictive than what is legally allowed.
- As result of improperly denied treatment, consumers are inappropriately charged for services that should be covered under Denti-Cal.

Denti-Cal Denied includes compelling case stories that bring to light the real-life

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experiences behind the problems low-income consumers experience trying to get oral health services. The report reveals the common nature of the difficulties and makes recommendations for improving access to dental services for consumers with Medi-Cal. “A goal of this report is to improve the responsiveness of dental care providers, dental plans, and the California Department of Health Services so that necessary dental care is provided in a timely manner,” states Lorraine Jones, Health Consumer Alliance (HCA) Director and principal author of today’s report.

The report comes as the state addresses a major budget deficit. “Cutting dental benefits is not a cost-effective way to help solve a funding crisis,” stated Robert K. Ross, MD, President and CEO of The California Endowment, HCA’s main funder. “This report shows that the current dental care system under Medi-Cal needs repair, not elimination. Denying access to necessary oral health services will end up costing the state more in the long run as untreated minor problems fester and become more expensive to treat.”

Denti-Cal Denied is the first report to provide a comprehensive picture of the problems consumers experience in both Medi-Cal dental HMOs and fee-for-service systems. *Denti-Cal Denied* uses objective data and compelling anecdotes to document the problems of hundreds of Medi-Cal consumers (including children) who suffer from untreated or improperly treated dental disease.

“Many of the denials reported to us stem from unnecessary and inflexible rules that are inconsistent with contemporary standards of care, and in some cases, violate federal law,” states Shelley Rouillard, Program Director of the Sacramento-based Health Rights Hotline and a co-author of today’s report. “Heavily bureaucratized procedures also cause serious delays in care and discourage dentists from seeking approval for necessary services.”

Denti-Cal Denied is based on reports from 10,332 Medi-Cal consumers during a two-year period – from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2001. These individuals contacted seven health consumer assistance programs in California that help low-income consumers resolve problems with their health care, including dental care. Collectively, these programs are known as the Health Consumer Alliance (HCA) and serve low-income consumers in Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, Sacramento (and surrounding counties), San Diego, San Francisco and San Mateo. Consumers get help free of charge through a telephone hotline or in-person consultation, depending on the county and the consumer’s circumstances. The HCA is a partnership led by the National Health Law Program that also includes the Western Center on Law and Poverty.

In addition to assisting individual consumers, HCA diagnoses systemic health access issues and seeks improvements in the health care system for the 3.2 million low-income people who reside in its combined 10-county service area. A uniform database system allows programs to collect detailed information about the problems that consumers experience and the results achieved by advocates.

The full report is available on the Health Consumer Alliance Web site at www.healthconsumer.org/DentiCalRpt.pdf.

Attached is a list of the local organizations that make up the HCA, with contact information for media and consumers.

Health Consumer Alliance Partners and Contact Information:

COUNTY	HEALTH CONSUMER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM	MEDIA CONTACT	CONTACT NUMBER FOR CONSUMERS
Fresno	Fresno Health Consumer Center	Chris Schneider or Teresa Alvarado, 559.570.1205	800.300.1277
Los Angeles	Health Consumer Center of Los Angeles	Michele Melden, 818.834.7516	800.896.3203
Orange	Health Consumer Action Center	Nancy Rimsha, 714.571.5229	800.834.5001 or 714.571.5200
Sacramento, El Dorado, Placer & Yolo	Health Rights Hotline	Elizabeth Landsberg 916.551.2182	888.354.4474
San Diego	Consumer Center for Health Education and Advocacy	Gregory Knoll, 619.471.2620	877.734.3258
San Francisco	Community Health Advocacy Project	Mike Keys, 415.982.1300, ext. 314	800.551.5554
San Mateo	Health Consumer Center of San Mateo County	Melissa Rodgers, 650.573.3945, ext. 325	800.381.8898
STATEWIDE PARTNERS	National Health Law Program	Manjusha Kulkarni 301.204.6010	
	Western Center on Law & Poverty	Kim Lewis 213.487.7211, ext. 28 or Angela Gilliard 916.442.0753, ext. 15	