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## Dental care in Kentucky making gains, but 'we still have long way to go'

By Deborah Yetter The Courier-Journal

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FRANKFORT, Ky. – Kentucky still has dismal dental problems and poor overall oral health but is making some gains in attacking them, according to research presented to a legislative committee Thursday.

Expanded access to dental care was one of the greatest gains from Kentucky's decision to expand Medicaid and create a health exchange under the Affordable Care Act, according to the presentation of research funded in part by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

But high rates of dental disease and lack of access to care, especially in rural areas, still hinder people from getting the care they need, project director Margaret Langelier told the House Health and Welfare Committee.

"Kentucky has made great strides in improving oral health and access to dental care but we still have a long way to go," said Langelier, with the Center for Health Workforce Studies at the University of Albany School of Public Health in New York.

Rep. Tom Burch, a Louisville Democrat and committee chairman, said the state needs to keep working on solutions.

The report singled out the Medicaid expansion, which added more than 425,000 Kentuckians to the government health plan, for giving many more low-income adults a way to pay for dental care. Approximately another 100,000 people added coverage through private health plans purchased through kynect, the state health insurance exchange created under the federal health law also known as Obamacare.

In 2014, more than 100,000 more persons eligible for Medicaid received a dental service than the previous year, the report said.

The number of Medicaid-eligible children who received a preventative dental service also increased significantly in 2014, compared to past years, the report found. In 2014, 38 percent of such children saw a dentist compared to about 15 percent in 2000, it said.

Still, many children went without such care. More than half of Kentucky's Medicaid-eligible children receive no oral health services each year, it said.

Dental and oral health problems, such as cancer or other diseases of the mouth and gums, remain a significant problem in Kentucky. And it's a problem that tends to affect poor, less-educated people in rural Kentucky at much higher rates, the report said.

Kentucky still has a high rate of adults over 65 who have had all their natural teeth extracted. Kentucky also has some of the nation's highest rates of oral cancer, associated with smoking or other tobacco use.

And outside urban areas, including Louisville, Lexington and Northern Kentucky, many people have trouble getting access to a dentist. The report said four counties have no dentist, 13 have only one dentist and 12 have only two dentists.

Complicating the problem is that many Kentucky dentists see few or no Medicaid patients. Still the report found Kentucky should be “inspired” by the progress and continue to build on the progress it has made.