

Good morning members of the committee. My name is Lisa Valdez. I am a registered dental hygienist who has served low-income children with Kids in Need of Dentistry (KIND) for over a decade. KIND oversees a program called Chopper Topper. Chopper Topper provides basic oral health screening, preventive dental sealants, fluoride, oral health education, and dental referrals at no cost, right inside kids' schools. We prioritize schools where more than 50% of students receive free and reduced lunch because we know these kids often experience the highest barriers to getting needed dental care. Our approach increases access to these important disease prevention services and minimizes the cost and inconvenience for families to receive this necessary care.

I also coordinate KIND's Community Dental Health program, which helps our organization reach people who have high barriers to receiving oral health care in a typical dental practice where you and I might normally get our care.

KIND is a 110-year-old non-profit organization that is dedicated to serving children across Colorado. KIND is a scrappy team of true health-equity warriors who are most concerned with increasing access to oral health care that is judgment-free, positive, prevention-oriented and available for disease treatment when needed. We provide education to parents and kids with kindness and compassion regardless of whether they are able to pay for the cost of care and we come to the kids when the kids can't always come to a dentist.

As a result of the pandemic, KIND has seen an increase in the frequency of severe cavities and oral health needs in children. This may be the result of the need to delay or forgo treatment during the pandemic and changes in dietary habits and oral hygiene while at home.

Research has shown that dental sealants are nearly 100% effective in preventing dental decay in permanent molars in most cases, and especially when used in combination with other preventive measures such as fluoride, and regular brushing.

Much more than any other year I've worked in the schools, the decay seems to be more prevalent throughout the mouth and also larger in size. We have also noticed more stains, the need for more cleanings, and increases in calculus (tartar) buildup along the gum line which is contributing to unhealthy gums and tissues.

To be clear, I fear that we are seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of a severe decrease in children's oral health status in Colorado. It is both shocking and tragic because the vast majority of the disease we are witnessing is preventable.

It is imperative that we find ways to work with as many schools as possible to continue helping identify the oral needs for our children. Educating school administration on the

importance of oral health is important in gaining advocacy. I've been told that COVID has impacted the participation of our Chopper Topper program due to the extra work needed for COVID guidelines and mandates. Nursing shortages in schools and lack of available space are also important factors.

Yet, we know that we can provide the more preventive services that Colorado's children deserve when resources are available to support our work.

I am so grateful to the members of the committee for their interest and attention to children's oral health today. I am also so happy that the dental loan repayment program has been in place for over twenty years to help dental professionals who help Colorado's children be the healthiest that they can be.

Thank you for your time today.