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**Contact:** Liz Underwood, 312-251-9913  
lunderwood@ksapr.com

**CHILDREN IN ILLINOIS HAVE A NEW REASON TO SMILE**

*Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation announces \$20 million initiative to expand access to oral health care for children statewide*

**HINSDALE, Ill.** – The Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation (ILCHF), the only grant-making organization that focuses on health – particularly children's health – statewide, announces a major initiative aimed at improving the health of vulnerable Illinois children by expanding their access to oral health care services. Over the next five years, ILCHF will invest at least \$20 million in targeted efforts designed to increase the access children have to oral health care services. Initial funding will serve to build the capacity of the safety-net-system throughout the state to deliver high-quality oral health services; increase the number of oral health professionals caring for underserved children; and create a greater awareness of the role oral health plays in the overall health and well-being of a child.

Today, tooth decay remains one of the most common chronic infectious diseases among U.S. children and is five times as common as asthma and seven times as common as hay fever. Data gathered for Illinois shows 55 percent of third graders have some tooth decay and 30 percent with significant decay. Tooth decay is even more prevalent among children from low-income families. Sixty-four percent of third graders in Illinois' free/reduced-price lunch program have tooth decay, compared with 46 percent of students not in the program.

"Children who suffer from dental disease have difficulty eating, sleeping, interacting with classmates and learning. Tooth decay is a bacterial infection that if left untreated, can have serious implications to overall health," said Dr. Peter E. Doris, chair of ILCHF board of directors. "While Illinois has made great strides, there is still much to be done. We believe this initiative can have a profound impact on the health of children statewide."

Susan Kerr, president of ILCHF, added, "We know so much today about what needs to be done to improve children's oral health. It really becomes a matter of generating the momentum necessary to put that knowledge into practice. We hope other organizations will be encouraged to follow suit and join us in this effort."

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The first round of funding for ILCHF's new initiative is being offered through a request for proposal (RFP) designed to build the capacity of the safety-net-system that serves vulnerable children throughout Illinois. ILCHF will offer qualifying, not-for-profit, service providers up to \$3 million to either add new oral health services or expand existing oral health services for children. Grants will be awarded to select organizations later this year.

Over the past four years, ILCHF also has funded a variety of programs designed to increase the access Illinois children have to mental health services; and early screening and responses to developmental delays. A portion of ILCHF's funds available for grantmaking, will continue to be directed annually toward both of these areas.

The Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation was formed in 2003 with one goal in mind: to improve the health of all Illinois children. Through the release of targeted RFPs and proactive, ongoing funding, ILCHF works to eliminate the barriers that prevent children from regularly accessing high-quality health care. Over the past three years the Foundation has awarded more than \$17 million in grants to organizations serving children's health needs across the state. Please visit [www.ilchf.org](http://www.ilchf.org) for more information about the Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation and the oral health care initiative.

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