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Dental care for adults topic of bill

Dentists would get tax breaks for doing pro bono procedures

BY DAVID BEARD The Dominion Post

CHARLESTON — A bill that could help improve the dental health of low-income adults across the state has its origins in Morgantown.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, is the primary sponsor of House Bill (HB) 4160, which would grant dentists tax deductions of up to \$15,000 for free charity dental work — also known as pro bono work.

Retired Morgantown dentist William McCutcheon, former associate dean for academic affairs at WVU's dental school, promoted the bill. The bill won't solve West Virginia's oral health problems, he said, but "it's another cog in the wheel."

If a dentist simply wrote a check to charity equal to the value of the services he provided, he could get a deduction, McCutcheon said, but he can't deduct for pro bono work.

Richard Stevens, executive director of the West Virginia Dental Association, supports the bill.

It's important to note, he said, that while a doctor can go to a site to practice basic medicine, dental care has to be done in an equipped dental office. And the dentist must have an assistant on site.

It costs a dentist at least \$200,000 to fully equip an office, he said. Then there are the personnel costs on top of that.

Dentists already provide more than \$30 million a year in uncompensated dental care in West Virginia at free clinics or in their offices, Stevens said. This bill could help expand that.

Fleischauer is on the board of Morgantown's Milan Puskar Health Right clinic for low-income residents, where McCutcheon does a form of volunteer triage work for clients on the clinic's waiting list for dental care referrals.

Health Right Director Laura Jones said this bill could be one step in addressing West Virginia's "oral health crisis."

While the state's Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, covers low-income children, they all said, most adults don't have any dental coverage. And Medicaid — government health insurance for low-income citizens — covers adults up to age 21; after that it only covers extractions.

Because dental care is expensive, they said, most adults delay or avoid it. Jones said she has seen clients with infected teeth that have caused the entire side of their face to swell.

Fleischauer said this bill is a way to provide an incentive for dentists to either start doing pro bono work or increase the amount they're already donating.

Good oral health care is important for a number of reasons, Fleischauer and Jones said.

Jones said poor oral health can affect the whole body. For instance, hypertension — high blood pressure — can be caused or affected by the same bacteria that cause cavities.

And, Fleischauer said, people with oral health problems who need heart treatment often can't get their hearts fixed until their dental problems are addressed.

Bad teeth also affect employment prospects, she said. She cited a survey of state TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) recipients: 21 percent said bad teeth hampered their ability to get a job.

Different Health Rights have different dental programs, Stevens said. Charleston's has four equipped stations, and more than 80 area dentists take turns coming in to perform service.

Morgantown's clinic, Jones said, has a part-time hygienist who screens clients and refers them to one of 15 local dentists who perform pro bono work or to WVU's dental clinic.

Health Right saw 219 dental patients in 2009, the first full year of the dental program, she said.

But there's a waiting list, she said, and having more dentists on board would help. When a person spends 18 months to two years on a waiting list, a simple cavity can turn into a full extraction.

For those on the waiting list, Jones said, the clinic's hygienist and another volunteer provide oral health information.

And McCutcheon screens them to determine who needs medicine or immediate care, and who can wait.

The bill grants qualifying dentists a "decreasing tax modification," which is a tax deduction, said state Tax Department spokeswoman Kimberly Osborne. The bill allows the dentist to deduct the qualifying amount from his taxable income.

If the bill passes, she said, the Tax Department will craft any necessary forms dentists will need to use.

Any bill that involves tax deductions requires a "fiscal note" describing its impact on the state budget. Osborne said the fiscal note developed by the Tax Department shows if the bill becomes law with an applicable date of "on or before January 1, 2010," the General Revenue fund would be reduced by \$300,000 per year beginning with Fiscal Year 2011.

Although WVU's dental clinic is set up differently from a private office, Osborne said that according to the Tax Department's Legal Division, as it is currently written, the deduction could be taken by a salaried dentist working for WVU.

Dr. Louise Veselicky, interim dean of WVU's School of Dentistry, also supports the bill.

West Virginia is statistically one of the worst states for dental health in the country, she said. "As a dental school, we need to stop allowing this to happen."

What sparked her interest, she said, is a comment Jay Leno made in 2009 when Delegate Jeff Eldridge's bill to ban Barbie dolls drew national mockery. Commenting on Eldridge's assertion that Barbie inspired unrealistic expectations, Leno said that only in West Virginia would a doll with teeth reflect unrealistic expectations.

"We need to do everything we can to dispel this image of West Virginia," she said.

She noted that Mission of Mercy free dental clinics in Hedgesville and Parkersburg drew about 1,500 people, and some waited in line overnight for only one procedure.

"This is not how you want to address it," she said. "It's good the Legislature is taking a serious interest in oral health."

A similar bill is pending in the Senate Finance Committee. Sen. Ron Stollings, DBoone, is the chief sponsor.

