

The road to healthy teeth

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New legislation promotes dental hygiene, education

NAMBÉ, N.M. – U.S. Senators Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., Susan Collins, R-ME, and Ben Cardin, D-Md., introduced the Oral Health Literacy and Awareness Act to promote health care services and improve health outcomes among underserved communities.

Studies have shown oral health related illnesses have resulted in 6.1 million days of bed disability, 12.7 million days of restricted activity, and 20.5 million lost workdays each year, significantly impacting children, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations. Tooth decay is the most common chronic illness among school-age youth, affecting roughly one in four children, and nearly half of those aged 30 or older show signs of gum disease, which if left untreated can lead to tooth loss. In 2012, almost one in five Americans 65 and older had untreated cavities, and over 40% had gum disease.

The Oral Health Literacy and Awareness Act would authorize the Health Resources and Services Administration to develop and implement an evidence-based outreach strategy to promote oral health literacy in rural and underserved communities. This legislation will also create a five-year oral health literacy campaign to set Americans up for a lifetime of wellness and create a program to ensure children develop and maintain healthy habits into adulthood.

“In New Mexico and across the country, too many suffer from a lack of oral health knowledge

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which can lead to negative health outcomes overall. Increasing oral health literacy and education will help protect our loved ones from these oral-related illnesses that are entirely preventable by empowering them with accurate information to protect their health,” Luján said.

He said that’s why he is a part of the legislation.

“That’s why I joined with my colleagues to introduce legislation to develop and implement outreach strategies that promote oral health in communities where resources are needed the most,” Luján said. “This legislation also creates separate educational programs that will instill good dental practices for children and adults, ensuring they are set up for a long lifetime with healthy dental habits and ultimately lower costs for families.”

Collins pointed out how dental health can lead ot overall health.

“Proper oral hygiene is not only key to promoting dental health, but it can also contribute to overall health as well. The Oral Health Literacy and Awareness Act of 2022 would identify strategies to increase dental services in rural and underserved communities,” Collins said. “By improving education regarding dental care, this bipartisan bill would help to build a lifetime of healthy habits and avoid more costly interventions down the road.”

“Oral health is a vital component of our overall health and well-being. The Oral Health Literacy and Awareness Act works to increase awareness of the importance of oral health through the development of oral health literacy campaigns, particularly in rural and underserved communities,” Cardin said. “Promoting the importance of oral health is critical to combating health disparities along with increasing access to affordable oral health care. I am proud to continue working with my colleagues to expand awareness of and access to oral health care to all Americans.”

Gerlad J. Botko, DMD, MAGD, the president of the Academy of General Dentristry, applauded the legislation.

“The Academy of General Dentistry applauds Senators Ben Ray Luján, Susan Collins, and Ben

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Cardin for introducing the *Oral Health Literacy and Awareness Act of 2022*. This legislation is critical to improving the health of our communities and supporting all populations impacted by oral disease including children, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations,” Botko said. “AGD is proud to support and advocate for policies that improve oral health literacy and education.”

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