



Connecting with Students and Providers Through Advocacy at the Mid-Continent Dental Congress

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On September 24th and 25th, I had the opportunity to attend the Mid-Continent Dental Congress in St. Louis for the first time. The conference brought together students, providers, educators, exhibitors, and other oral health organizations from across the Midwest to connect, learn, and discuss the future of dentistry. It was truly inspiring to meet attendees from different parts of Missouri. As part of my role with MCOH, I am grateful for opportunities like this to connect with emerging and established oral health professionals who share a commitment to improving access to care.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the conference was engaging with students who visited the Missouri Coalition for Oral Health (MCOH) exhibitor booth. Many expressed an interest in learning more about oral health advocacy and policy. Although some had previously participated in advocacy events at the state Capitol, others were interested in becoming more involved but were unsure where to begin. These conversations reinforced the importance of continuing MCOH's outreach to dental schools and helping future oral health professionals understand how they can engage in advocacy and contribute their voices to policy change. It was particularly encouraging to hear from students who had previously attended MCOH presentations at their schools and remembered what they had learned about getting involved in advocacy. Seeing that connection firsthand was satisfying and reinforced the value of engaging professionals earlier in their careers.

The conference also provided an opportunity to connect with dental providers from across Missouri and share more about the Coalition's work. Many providers were interested in learning more about MCOH and discussing challenges, including provider Medicaid enrollment and access to care. These conversations also gave us an opportunity to highlight recent progress in Missouri, including increased Medicaid reimbursement rates, which have contributed to increased provider enrollment, and continued efforts to support community water fluoridation. Additionally, hearing providers and staff express their support for continued efforts around community water fluoridation was reassuring and showed the importance of sustained advocacy and collaboration.

Overall, the Mid-Continent Dental Congress was a valuable opportunity to strengthen relationships with dental professionals, students, and organizations while sharing the Coalition's work and encouraging greater involvement in oral health advocacy. Events like this demonstrate the importance of connecting with these present and future stakeholders to advance oral health across Missouri and support MCOH's vision of oral health for all Missourians.