AB 1174 (Bocanegra)
Meeting the Dental Care Needs of California’s Children
Through a Proven Community-Based Model

Background
Good dental health is critical to children’s ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn so that they can succeed in school and life. Yet, tooth decay is the most common chronic disease and unmet health care need of children in California. In fact, 71 percent of California’s children experience tooth decay by the time they reach the third grade. Furthermore, despite the recommendation by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry that children visit the dentist at the time of first tooth eruption and no later than one-year-old and that they have a dental check-up every six months after that, nearly a quarter of California’s children, ages 0-11, have never been to the dentist. Finally, 63 percent of children enrolled in Medi-Cal did not have a preventive dental visit in 2011.

The reason many children and other underserved populations suffer from poor oral health is because they face significant obstacles in obtaining dental services. For example, there are not enough providers in places where they live. Furthermore, many providers do not take children’s Medi-Cal health insurance or may not see certain populations, such as young children and children with special health care needs. In addition, low-income families may have difficulty accessing care because they lack affordable transportation, lose pay when they miss work, and face other socioeconomic barriers.

A Proven, Cost-Effective Solution
The Virtual Dental Home (VDH) is an innovative and cost-effective system for providing dental care to California’s most vulnerable children and adults. Through the VDH—a demonstration project, directed by the Pacific Center for Special Care at the University of the Pacific School of Dentistry—dental hygienists and assistants examine and collect dental information from patients in community settings—such as schools, Head Start sites, and nursing homes. They send that information electronically via a secure Web-based system (called store-and-forward telehealth) to the supervising dentist at a clinic or dental office. The dentist uses that information to create a dental treatment plan for the hygienist or assistant to carry out. The hygienists and assistants refer patients to dental offices for procedures that require the skills of a dentist. In its first three years of operation, the VDH has reached nearly 2,000 children and other underserved individuals with dental care that these individuals would otherwise go without. For more information about the VDH, visit www.virtualdentalhome.org.

The Need for AB 1174
The VDH is currently being implemented on a pilot basis and is grant-funded. Therefore, it is not replicable or sustainable in the current regulatory environment. Two of the procedures that the dental hygienists and assistants are performing are currently authorized under a Health Workforce Pilots Project (HWPP) program. This program, run by the California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, allows organizations to demonstrate and evaluate new or expanded roles for healthcare professionals before changes in licensing laws are made by the Legislature. Under the HWPP, the dental hygienists and assistants, participating in the VDH, are deciding which x-rays to take and are allowed to place interim therapeutic restorations (temporary fillings). These two duties are not within these professionals’ current scope of practice, but the HWPP has shown that dental hygienists and assistants can safely perform them.

In addition, California currently does not pay dentists for providing dental care via store-and-forward telehealth. Telehealth—the use of technology to provide care at a distance—is a critical component to providing care in community settings. It facilitates supervision of and collaboration among dental providers without the providers having to be in the same location.

What AB 1174 Does
AB 1174 will make it possible to implement the Virtual Dental Home statewide so that it can reach large numbers of underserved children and adults. Specifically, AB 1174:

- Allows Registered Dental Hygienists and Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions to decide which dental x-rays to take when examining patients;
- Allows Registered Dental Hygienists and Registered Dental Assistants in Extended Functions to place interim therapeutic restorations, under the direction of a supervising dentist; and
- Requires Medi-Cal to reimburse dentists for providing dental care through store-and-forward telehealth.

For more information and to support AB 1174, please visit http://www.childrenspartnership.org/advocacy/dental-health/ab-1174 or contact Jenny Kattlove: 310-260-1220 or jkattlove@childrenspartnership.org.