

February is [National Children's Dental Health Month](#). The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry](#) are among many national leaders highlighting the importance of this month.

Also noteworthy is that February 5th is [Give Kids a Smile Day](#). Launched nationally by the American Dental Association in 2003, GKAS events are intended to be touch points for children who do not receive dental care, for whatever reason. According to their website, the ultimate goal for a GKAS program should be to establish a dental home for these children - in other words, provide continuity of care.



NC ORAL HEALTH
COLLABORATIVE

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**You try it: try having a hearty belly laugh with your mouth closed.
It is impossible.**

This was Lily's greatest dilemma. At age 4, she had already come to terms with the fact that unlike other children, she would not be able to experience the joy, freedom, and delight of uninhibited laughter. The cliché is that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well this one way share a message that you are not eager to hear:



Photo taken by [YES! \(Youth Empowered Solutions\)](#)

The oral health system in North Carolina is failing many of our children. Even the children who have access to Medicaid (a benefit that many still lack) have to travel insurmountable distances to find a dentist who will accept them. That is, accept a child with Medicaid. In some counties in out state, there are zero dentists. That's right, zero.

According to UNC's Sheps Center for health Services Research, NC's dentists are concentrated in 1/5 of the state's counties. As you'll recall from our [first newsletter](#), NC ranks 44th in terms of ratio of dentists to population. That is, we

have 48 dentists per 100,000 people. And the bulk of them choose to work in the metropolitan counties.

Plus, an additional barrier to contend with is that this shortage of dentists is only getting worse, the dental workforce is graying and our state's two dental schools are only able to graduate about 130 dentists per year TOTAL. Although we'd like to think these issues of inequities in oral health affect a few poor children, this is simply not true. This issue is so compelling because it affects too many of us.

But that's enough of the glass-half-empty talk.

More and more of us are realizing that the status quo will no longer suffice. We are clear that Lily's story is unfortunately all too common, and for this reason we are coming together to work towards real systems change, Our list of [powerful and committed members and partners](#) grows more every day. Brilliant minds coming together to find a solution to this oral health access conundrum, Throughout the year, we will continue to extend invitations for you to join us in this good work. For now: [join us on February 19th](#) as we dive deeper into our # Focus Areas and step up for Lily, for children like her, and for everyone who deserves to savor the healing power of uninhibited laughter.

Zulayka Santiago | Director, NC Oral Health Collaborative
919-821-0485 ext. 233 | zulayka.santiago@foundationhli.org
oralhealthnc.org | foundationhli.org