



## Dental care action urged

### Oral Health Coalition pushing Queen's Park on promise to aid poor

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Staff Reporter

The Liberal government needs to act swiftly on its promise to create a \$45 million-a-year dental care program for the working poor, dental care activists say.

And to pressure the government, the Toronto Oral Health Coalition has launched a card-mailing campaign to MPPs at Queen's Park, supporting access to dental care for those who cannot afford it.

"We want to make sure that the government gets started on the program," said Dr. Hazel Stewart, chair of the Toronto Oral Health Coalition and the City of Toronto's chief dentist.

Stewart launched the campaign yesterday during the annual conference of the Ontario Public Health Association, passing out the postcards emblazoned with a photograph of Jason Jones, a young man featured in a *Toronto Star* series on dental care. Jones lost most of his teeth because he could not afford proper treatment.

After his story was published last February, Jones received dentures and dental implants from a Markham dentist and a job with the Boilermakers' Association.

Laurel Ostfield, a spokesperson for Health Minister George Smitherman said the government is moving forward on the election promise to create a \$45-million program, but did not have a timeline as to when it would be in place.

"We want to make sure that we do it right," said Ostfield, in a recent interview.

"We want to consult with other people in government and stakeholders to develop that policy. That is ongoing right now."

Many low-income earners do not have health benefits through work and as a result they cannot afford to pay for dental fees.

Ostfield said the promised plan will provide a range of preventative and treatment services, such as fluoride treatment, scaling, sealing, extractions and restorations.

The health ministry, along with the Ministry of Health Promotion and the Ministry of Community and Social Services will determine the best way to provide these programs,

she said.

The card campaign costs about \$1,300 and is paid for by several community-based organizations, including the Ontario Association of Public Health Dentistry, which has long advocated for better access to dental care, Stewart said.

The Toronto Oral Health Coalition wants the government to adopt a program that uses public health dentists, community health centres and private dentists, depending on the needs of the local community, she said.

"This issue has never been addressed in the past," Stewart said. "It will be a good start."