



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation's Land of Smiles program helps kids fight cavities

(NAPERVILLE), Ill. — Jan. 23, 2018 – Poor oral health habits for Illinois children of all ages could be contributing to tooth decay. In fact, 35 percent of Illinois children had at least one cavity in the past 12 months.¹ Tooth Wizard and PlaqueMan with [Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation's Land of Smiles program](#) will visit pre-kindergarten through third-grade students to teach them cavity-fighting oral health lessons.

Although largely preventable, the U.S. Surgeon General identifies tooth decay as the most common chronic childhood disease. According to the 2017 Delta Dental of Illinois Children's Oral Health Survey, nearly half of Illinois kids ages 6 to 12 have missed school due to dental problems, which include cavities, in the past 12 months.²

"Land of Smiles furthers our mission to improve the oral health of Illinois children by getting them excited to take care of their teeth and overall oral health," said Lora Vitek, director of philanthropy and community relations for Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation. "We're hoping to help decrease the number of young children with cavities and other oral health conditions by teaching them the importance of good oral health at an early age and how to maintain or improve their health."

Students will begin their oral health journey by helping heroic Tooth Wizard defeat his evil nemesis PlaqueMan by learning the habits needed to have healthy smiles and bodies. Children will get involved in the fun during the interactive performance, helping demonstrate how to correctly brush, floss and use fluoride rinse causing PlaqueMan to scurry off the stage in defeat.

The Land of Smiles program seeks to combat poor oral health. A state oral health assessment report, *Oral Health in Illinois*, released in 2016 and sponsored by Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation and others, found that poor oral health is one of the most pressing, unmet health care issues facing Illinois children, particularly for those living in poverty and rural areas.

In fact, the report found that one third of Illinois children in rural areas have untreated tooth decay. Illinois children living in poverty are five times more likely to have fair or poor oral health. And only 55 percent of children on Medicaid saw a dentist in the past year.³

“While many children are not getting the dental care they need, they are also not receiving oral health education. Education is key to a lifetime of good oral health and overall health,” said Vitek. “Our Land of Smiles program teaches children important oral health lessons at a young age so they can establish a foundation for healthy smiles and bodies, allowing them to focus and flourish at school and beyond.”

The free Land of Smiles program not only emphasizes good oral hygiene techniques, but also teaches children the importance of eating tooth-friendly foods, visiting the dentist regularly and having sealants applied.

In addition to the oral health lesson, children who participate in Land of Smiles will receive an oral health kit with a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss and a booklet packed with oral health tips. Schools will also receive a curriculum kit to help educators reinforce good oral health habits with students throughout the year.

In 2018, the Land of Smiles program will reach nearly 38,000 pre-kindergarten through third-grade students in nearly 175 Illinois elementary schools throughout the state. The program has reached over 330,000 students at more than 800 Illinois schools in the past 10 years.

For those interested in requesting a Land of Smiles appearance at their school, visit landofsmilesil.org.

About Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation

The Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation was formed in March 2008 by Delta Dental of Illinois, a not-for-profit dental service corporation with a mission to improve the oral health of the communities it serves. Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation is the 501(c)(3) charitable arm of Delta Dental of Illinois and works to support and improve the oral health of people in Illinois. In the past decade, combined efforts of Delta Dental of Illinois and Delta Dental of Illinois Foundation have provided more than \$3 million to programs and organizations in Illinois that improve the oral health of the residents of Illinois.

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¹Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), 2013-2014 school year.

²Kelton, a leading global insights firm, conducted the 2017 Delta Dental of Illinois Children’s Oral Health Survey. Interviews were conducted statewide via email with 155 Illinois parents of children ages 12 and under. For results based on the total sample of Illinois adults, the margin of error is +/- 7.9% at a 95 percent confidence level.

³Oral Health in Illinois Report, 2016.