

Open wide

How Oregonians are eating the social and economic cost of bad oral health

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STAFF WRITER

Sitting in a reclining chair in Multnomah County's newest dental clinic for the first time, Kenneth can't help but smile. Despite his crooked, gapped grin, he's beaming today for a chance to start afresh, a chance to take back years of dental neglect and to finally feel confident in the one thing that has found a way to negatively affect every aspect of his life: his teeth.

"I've always been self-conscious of my smile," he says. "It hurts my confidence and my ability to be myself. And what girls want to kiss a guy with nasty teeth?"

Kenneth's also dealt with years of oral pain from neglected abscesses and infections. But the physical consequences are not the sole threat of poor dental care. From job insecurity to inadequate education to crippling depression, insufficient oral health seems to be a slippery slope towards a range of life-altering issues.

With the controversial Portland pro-fluoridation

measure on the May ballot, this issue has become more relevant than ever. While some see the fluoridation of the city's water as a Big Brotheresque move, forcing everyone to drink potentially contaminated water, other residents see it as a necessity for maintaining oral health in populations who can't afford dental treatment.

Regardless of where you stand on the issue of fluoridation, the issue of oral health is one that spans entire lives, affecting social, economic and emotional development from grade school onward.

"I would visit Head Start programs in Portland where more than half of the three-year-old kids have mouths filled with metal fillings," says Nichole Maher, president of the Northwest Health Foundation. "One of the main reasons kids would skip school was for dental care, and for the uninsured, that usually meant a hefty emergency room bill."

According to a 2010 study by the Oregon Department of Human Services, 20 percent of children had significant tooth decay in seven or

more of their teeth. And a 2006 report by the same department found that 16,000 school hours were lost in Oregon due to dental pain in students and emergency visits to the dentist.

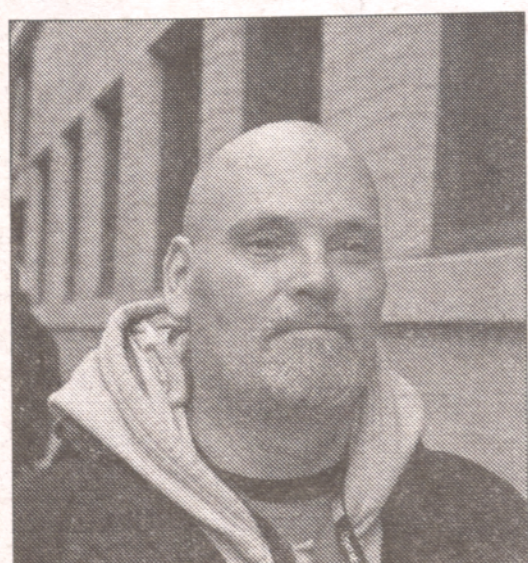
Last year, the Pew Charitable Trust's Dental Campaign compiled a report on the cost to states as people go to the emergency room with dental health care problems, shifting the expense onto Medicaid and other public programs. The report estimates that preventable dental conditions were the primary reason for 830,590 ER visits by Americans in 2009 — a 16 percent increase from 2006. In 2010, according to the report, the number of dental-related emergency visits by Oregon's Medicaid enrollees was 31 percent higher than just two years before. That translates into tens of millions of dollars in emergency room charges.

The American Dental Association has found that children with untreated dental disease have difficulty learning, they miss more school days than

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

See OPEN WIDE, page 5

Inside



City looks to cut social safety net

More than \$25 million in cuts looming

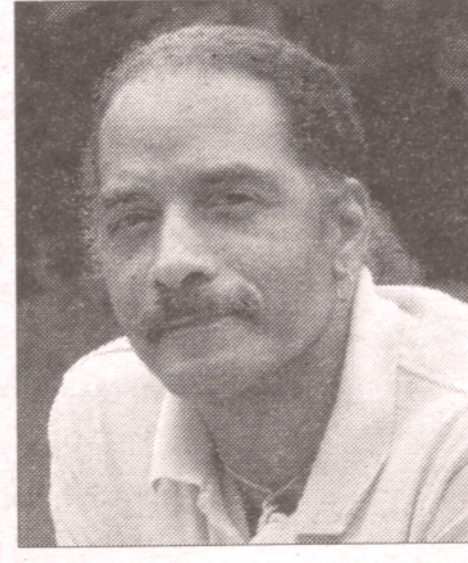
Page 3



Public Safety

Rep. Jennifer Williamson talks reform

Page 4



Growing up a Panther

Aaron Dixon reflects on the civil rights movement

Page 8