

“This Is the Way It’s Supposed To Work” Mary Kay Cowen and the Louisiana Dental Task Force

In 2016, VOR created the Quality of Care in the Community Committee (Q of C) to address issues facing families whose loved ones had moved out of ICFs and into HCBS settings. One of the first issues we discussed in the Q of C was the need for dental care in community settings. Access to good dental care wasn’t an issue in most state-operated ICFs, but it was a major hurdle for families in group homes. We brought in Dr. Matt Holder of the Lee Specialty Clinic in KY, and VOR’s George Mavridis joined the committee to share his work with establishing training for dental students at Tufts University to learn how to better deal with the I/DD population. We spoke with people at CMS and the Administration for Community Living about this need, and offered ideas for how they might use their agencies’ political clout and finances to help fill the gap in services for people in community settings, and even spoke with people at the American Dental Association. Everyone we spoke to sounded interested, but nothing much came to fruition. Until this year.

One member of the Q of C was Mary Kay Cowen, who serves as guardian for her brother Tommy. In 2012, she had moved Tommy out of a state-operated ICF and placed him into a smaller, private setting. Mary Kay was pleased with the services that her brother was receiving, except he wasn’t getting proper dental care. Inspired by our discussions in the Q of C meetings, she set out to do something about it. She kept speaking up at local and State-wide meetings until the Louisiana State Advisory Committee she was on created a Dental Task Force charged with coming up with a report to address the unmet dental health care needs of adults with I/DD who need anesthesia or IV sedation. Borrowing a few ideas from Matt Holder’s presentations, obtaining input from Tufts University through George Mavridis’ connections, and with the help of her new friend Kathy Dwyer and others on the Dental Task Force, she wound up with an impressive group of advocates in the Baton Rouge/New Orleans area to define goals and determine policies they wanted to see put in place. Their primary goals included:

- 1) *Provide comprehensive dental health coverage for adults similar to the coverage given to children to prevent more serious and costly medical issues.*
- 2) *Develop pre-doctoral dental education programs as required by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) along with a post-doctoral training for CEUs to build and expand on the capacity and competency of the existing dental workforce in public and private practice.*
- 3) *Make necessary dental equipment available in hospitals and outpatient surgery centers throughout the state so dentists have the equipment needed.*

Once the task force had completed its original goal of creating a report, no one in the committee wanted to stop the forward momentum of making something happen. With the approval of all involved government entities, they sent their report to legislators who were known to have an I/DD family member and found State Representative Rhonda Butler who was determined to enact legislation guaranteeing the state would provide quality dental care to people with I/DD. She introduced a bill that passed the state house assembly and senate with unanimous support, providing care for adults in Louisiana’s DD Waiver Programs. The governor signed the bill into law in late June, 2021. Because ICFs are funded differently, Rep. Butler presented a House Resolution which also passed unanimously mandating Louisiana Department of Health come up with a way to implement the same program for people in private ICFs and group homes.



Rep. Rhonda Butler, Mary Kay Cowen, Kathy Dwyer & her daughter Jennifer Blaque

*Testimony at the LA House of Representatives may be viewed at:
https://house.louisiana.gov/H_Video/VideoArchivePlayer?v=house/2021/apr/0427_21_HW
beginning about 53 minutes into the video stream.)*

We hope that Mary Kay’s work in Louisiana will inspire other members of VOR to enact similar bills in their states, or encourage others to bring the issues that most affect their loved ones to their state capitols and find elected officials who are willing to act on behalf of people with I/DD.