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Advocacy Spotlight: Sen. Sam Singh, MDA Legislator of the Year

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Interview by Neema Katibai, JD

Sen. Sam Singh, MDA Legislator of the Year

Sen. Sam Singh (D-East Lansing) serves as Michigan Senate Majority Floor Leader, and is the recipient of the latest MDA Legislative Achievement

Award (see Page 46). Singh previously (2013-18) served in the Michigan House and has long been a strong supporter of Michigan dentistry. What follows is a brief interview with him in which he explains why oral health is a priority, and how the MDA's efforts have paid off with the passage of two important legislative initiatives.

MDA: What motivated you to return to the state Legislature and run for the Senate after already serving as a state representative?

Singh: After being termed out in the state House, I knew I would be interested in running for office again. My career and passion has always been in public service, and policy-making is an important component of that work. I spent the four years between my service in the House and the Senate working for a public policy and evaluation firm in the private sector. Now, serving as the Majority Floor Leader, I'm excited that I can work on a number of issues that I started working on in the House, and can guide them to implementation.

MDA: Last year you were the sponsor for SB 281, which addressed one of the MDA's top priorities: network leasing transparency. You also were the sponsor of SB 280, which ensures that kindergartners will receive oral health assessments when they begin school. Can you share some insight on what it took to pass these bills and

their importance to the overall oral health of Michigan?

Singh: Oral health has often been overlooked in conversations surrounding expanding health care and health services, and yet it's one of the most important health indicators for children and adults. I looked forward to working on Senate Bill 280 early in our first year in office because I wanted to shift that perspective.



Sen. Sam Singh

In 2021, a pilot program was set up to begin oral health screenings for Pre-K and kindergartners — it was vitally important to me that this pilot project become permanent and also that we expanded the footprint statewide to cover all young people. Further, instead of treating the oral health screenings as optional, we designed the legislation to align with the required vision and hearing tests that have successfully been in place for decades. As with all new programs and initiatives, there must be a funding component. I was very happy to partner with Gov. Whitmer on this effort to make sure that expanding the oral health assessment wasn't an unfunded mandate on our local public health departments.

Expanding children's health, and specifically dental health, is something most lawmakers can get behind. Additionally, knowing exactly how many children would be impacted by requiring these assessments lends itself to garnering more support as there are tangible results we can point to.

Streamlining access to care and reducing administrative red tape for patients is also an incredibly bipartisan issue. SB 281 brought attention to how we could accomplish that for both providers and patients. It's often

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an arduous process to draft up a bill and work through stakeholder feedback. The MDA legislative team spent a lot of effort behind the scenes to get the network leasing transparency legislation ready before I introduced the bill.

MDA: What about networking leasing?

Singh: All of the MDA membership is aware of how dental network leasing created challenges within their own practice. By creating network transparency in Michigan, providers will be better-suited to offer the proper care and coverage for their customers. However, also important to this effort will be the impact on customers, who won't be confused and subject to surprise billing months later.

Both of these issues would not have been successful without the efforts of the Michigan Dental Association, and I was very pleased to partner on these two major oral health initiatives. Additionally, both pieces of legislation were a good illustration of policy that would be bipartisan in nature, and a program supported by the governor.

MDA: What advice would you give a dentist who wants to become more involved with advocacy and policy-making?

Singh: Joining and participating in dental associations that organize advocacy days and opportunities to interact with elected officials is a good way to begin getting involved in the legislative process. Additionally, researching who your elected officials are locally, in the state Legislature and federally, is important, so you can call or email their offices when issues come up that are either concerning or something you support. ●



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