



POLICY BRIEF

Dental Medicaid in Pennsylvania

Photo credit: Mickey Nye

Untreated dental issues can lead to serious medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes complications, and infections. Optimal oral health is a necessity to maintain overall health.

Key components to maintaining oral health are prevention and the ability to access affordable, quality dental care in a timely manner. Despite this important consideration, adults enrolled in Medicaid do not have comprehensive dental benefits.

Adults with limited or no access to restorative dental care often visit the emergency room for treatment, a far more costly and ineffective way to treat dental health problems.

*Instead of saving tax dollars, **Medicaid cuts have increased costs** as Pennsylvanians sought oral health relief in more intensive settings like emergency departments. ER visits for dental issues cost Pennsylvania taxpayers **over \$35 million annually**, with spending increasing by over 60% since 2010. Hospital inpatient treatment for oral diseases, nearly **ten times more expensive** than dental office treatment.*

According to the **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality**:

- ❑ **Low-income adults suffer a disproportionate share of dental disease** and are 50% less likely to have seen a dentist in the past year. 42% have untreated tooth decay, and more than one third of adults 65 and older have lost all their teeth.
- ❑ **Poor oral health can also hinder opportunities for individuals seeking employment.** Adults who are able to access oral healthcare have improved well-being, better employability and fewer missed workdays due to dental issues.
- ❑ The **current benefits limit exception (BLE)** process that is needed for medically necessary adult services such as root canals or extractions is an administrative nightmare for both managed care organizations and dental providers. Few BLEs are approved, patients suffer, and funds are wasted on grievance and appeals processes.

Restoring adult MA dental benefits will improve patients' quality of life and reduce overall costs of providing health care in the Commonwealth.

Pennsylvania must act now! The shortage of dentists is already a crisis. Common sense insurance reforms like restoring comprehensive dental coverage in Medicaid will invite more dental school graduates to stay and dedicate their focus to expanding patient care.

Restoring MA dental benefits is among several reforms being championed by PDA that would improve patient access to critical dental care in the Commonwealth.

Questions or concerns?

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