

PENNSYLVANIA'S DENTISTRY CRISIS

A CALL TO ACTION

Photo credit: Mickey Nye

Many Pennsylvanians have difficulty getting access to dental care, even those with private insurance and especially those with Medicaid or no insurance. In rural communities, finding a dentist who accepts your insurance isn't just inconvenient, it's becoming impossible. In **48 of our 67 counties**, there is a critical shortage of dental practitioners. Retirements are outpacing newcomers to the profession creating a growing gap in access to oral health care. **Pennsylvania experienced the highest decline in the number of dentists per 100,000 residents (-13.3%) compared to every other state and the District of Columbia between 2014-2024**. In many rural areas, there are just **31 dentists per 100,000** residents. (Health Policy Institute)

The consequences are stark:

- In some counties, residents wait **up to two years** for an appointment.
- The closest dentist for some patients may be more than 100 miles away adding **transportation costs and time off work** to the burden of accessing care.
- There are 163 federally designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas across the Commonwealth, meaning **only 36% of oral health needs are being met**.
- **Rural communities are hit hardest**, with fewer dentists choosing to practice in these areas despite high enrollment in Pennsylvania's dental schools.

This is not simply a workforce issue—it's a public health and economic issue. Untreated dental problems lead to higher emergency room costs, lost workdays, and poorer overall health outcomes. Yet the barriers to starting and sustaining a dental practice in Pennsylvania remain steep, discouraging new providers from serving where they are needed most.

This report outlines a clear, actionable plan to reverse the trend—strengthening our dental workforce, expanding access, and ensuring that **every Pennsylvanian, regardless of ZIP code, can get timely and convenient access to dental health care**.



> Dental students are choosing to practice in other states because they simply can't afford to practice here.
>
> Maria Tacelosky, DDS - Tamaqua, PA

An Urgent Call to Action

Pennsylvania must act now. The shortage of dentists is already a crisis—felt most sharply in rural communities. Between 2014 and 2024, Pennsylvania ranked as the **worst state in the nation** for dentist retention, with a **13.3% net loss** of practitioners, according to the American Dental Association Health Policy Institute.

Our dental schools are graduating record numbers of students, yet f**ewer than half** choose to stay and practice here. Five years post-grad, just 2 of 5 Temple grads, one third of University of Pittsburgh grads, and less than one fifth (18%) of U Penn grads are in PA.

Typically worried about repaying an average of roughly **$300,000** in student loan debt (American Dental Education Association), many leave for states where dental insurers are held accountable and treat providers more fairly, and reimbursement rates keep up with costs. Pennsylvania ranks **dead last** for dental insurance reimbursement.

To protect patient access to essential dental care, we need **targeted legislative and regulatory reforms** that make it easier for dentists to start and sustain a practice in the Commonwealth.

These common sense changes will help keep more dentists in Pennsylvania and ensure that more patients get the care they need.

Ward Blackwell
PDA Executive Director



The biggest challenge is low reimbursement rates that don't cover costs. Insurance companies have not increased payments to dentists in 16 years, yet our patients' preminums continue to rise. The second challenge is recruiting other dentists. I've been trying for quite a while to find someone to add to my practice. I'm just so busy right now. I'm really not taking new patients at all.

Andrew W. Zimmerman, DDS
Centre Hall, PA





A lack of access to oral health services is a critical issue facing rural Pennsylvanians and can be linked to several negative health implications. **Pennsylvania's Rural Health Transformation Plan** outlines a multifaceted approach to improve rural oral health: grow the dental workforce, improve oral health literacy, expand medical-dental integration; and, to prevent dental disease in rural communities, maintain and grow the number of rural water systems that optimally fluoridate water for their rural residents.

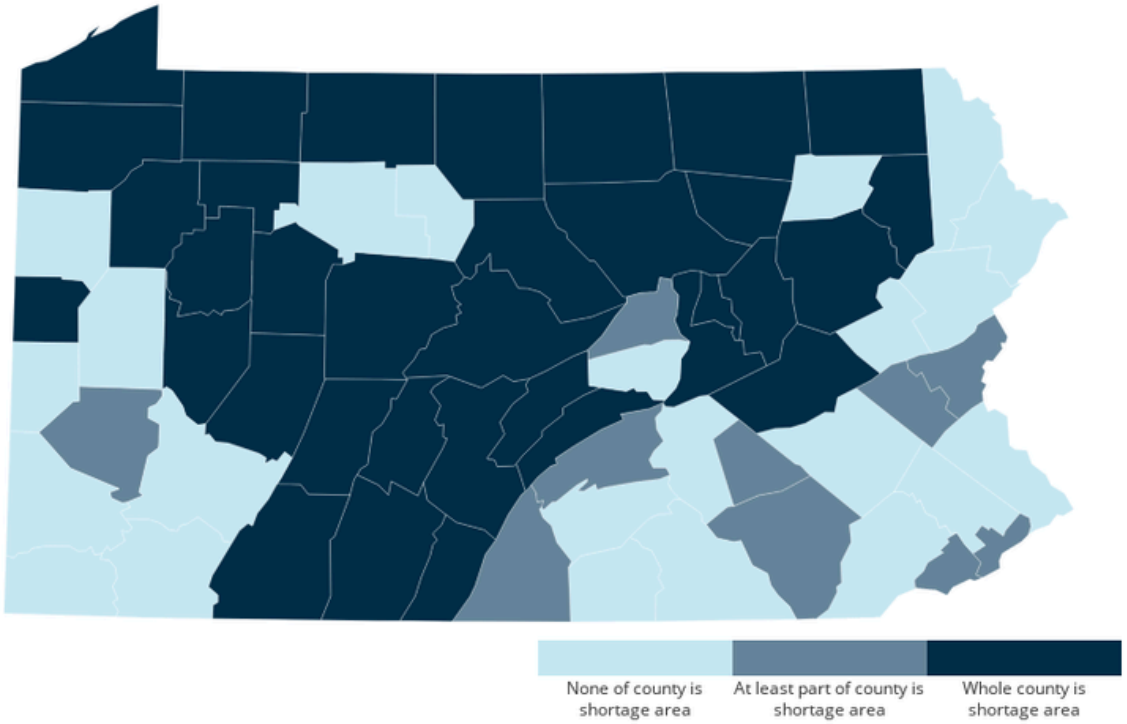
PDA's input to the plan focused on the necessity of policy reforms to attract and retain more dental professionals to Pennsylvania including:

- Raise commercial and public insurance reimbursement rates.
- Incentivize dentists by offering scholarship and retirement programs, tax breaks, student loan repayment, and government-backed loans to purchase dental practices in rural areas.
- Implement the ADA's Community Dental Health Program to help with prevention and facilitate care for patients to reduce incidence of missed appointments due to transportation and other barriers for patients.
- Improve broadband capability in rural areas and offer more dentists the technology needed to provide telehealth services.

www.paruralhealth.org

PENNSYLVANIA'S DENTISTRY CRISIS by the *Numbers*

Health Professional Shortage Areas: Dental Care, by County, July 2025 - Pennsylvania



RHIhub Rural Health Information Hub

Source: data.HRSA.gov.

Average age of PA dentists* **52**

17% Percentage of dentists serving rural communities*

46 Average age of dental hygienist*

Lowest reimbursement rates in the nation, yet premiums continue to rise

Greatest decline in supply of dentists in the nation † **-13.3%**

47.4 dentists per 100,000 people living in rural areas
55.2 per 100,000 in urban/suburban

*2023 Pennsylvania Dentist and Dental Hygienist Workforce Survey Report, PA Department of Health
† Health Policy Institute, Change in Dentists per 100,000 Population from 2014-2024

Legislative action will bridge the gap in access to dental health care.

Reversing Pennsylvania's dentist shortage requires a **competitive business climate** to attract and retain practitioners—especially in rural areas. Reforming dental insurance will **expand access, improve care, and promote equity** in underserved communities.

Uphold standards of transparency and accountability for dental insurers.	**Price transparency for patient premiums.** Require dental insurers to report the percentage of premium revenue that they spend on patient care. **Require notice from dental insurers before network leasing to protect continuity of care.** Benefit coverage should be easy to explain to patients.
Position Pennsylvania as a competitive place to practice dentistry.	**Standardize the credentialing process.** Reduce administrative hurdles and prevent untimely delays for health care providers who are ready to start practicing in Pennsylvania. **Address inequitable reimbursement rates and low salaries.** Rates that accurately cover costs mean more oral health professionals can afford to practice in an underserved community.
Reinstate a comprehensive adult dental benefit in Medicaid.	**Restore adult MA dental benefits.** Untreated dental issues can lead to serious medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes complications, and infections. Restoring benefits will reduce overall health care costs in Pennsylvania.

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"Right now we have no real system of accountability (for dental insurers) in Pennsylvania. There may be regulations on the books, (but with weak enforcement) there is no reason for those entities to follow the rules."

James Mancini DMD - Meadville, PA
PDA President 2026-2027

PDA Pennsylvania Dental Association

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