

December 17, 2021

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chairman, Committee on Finance
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer and Chairman Wyden:

As the Senate continues to craft its version of the Build Back Better legislation, you are weighing numerous policies to improve the lives of Americans as the country continues its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The undersigned organizations strongly urge you to include a policy that would improve oral health in America: including guaranteed comprehensive adult dental coverage as a mandatory benefit for all state Medicaid programs. Poor oral health is not confined to the mouth; it impacts overall health and limits the ability of Americans to perform in the workforce. For this reason, a lack of Medicaid dental health coverage is a significant impediment to a sustained, equitable economic recovery.

We urge you to include legislation similar to the Medicaid Dental Benefit Act (S. 3166), led by Sen. Cardin (D-MD) and Sen. Stabenow (D-MI), in the Senate's Build Back Better package. Key provisions in S. 3166 would make comprehensive adult dental care a mandatory component of Medicaid coverage for every state Medicaid program. Requiring dental coverage would close a huge gap in current Medicaid benefits, which are an increasingly important lifeline for millions of American families. As you know, adult dental coverage is currently an optional benefit, and many states provide little or no oral health coverage for adults. As a result, dental care is currently out of reach for millions of people. These cost barriers have only increased in recent years, with Black and Hispanic communities reporting the highest financial hurdles to accessing the care they need.

Given these challenges, adding adult dental benefits to Medicaid would advance racial, economic, and health justice. Access to dental care is one of the most overlooked examples of health disparities today. America's entrenched racial and economic inequities risk individual and community wellbeing, and the pandemic has only made these inequities more apparent. To illustrate, nearly twice as many Black and Mexican American adults and nearly three times as many American Indian and Alaskan Native adults suffer from untreated cavities as white adults, and these groups are among those that have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Securing Medicaid oral health coverage for adults could alleviate needless suffering while also advancing equity.

There are also important economic benefits to improving dental care. For many adults, being able to afford dental care could be the key to getting a new job, improving their economic security. Currently, three in ten working-age adults with lower incomes report that the appearance of their mouth and teeth affects their ability to interview for a job, limiting their

economic potential, and dragging down the economy as a whole. In addition, research suggests that the U.S. loses more than \$45 billion each year in productivity due to untreated dental disease. Expanding Medicaid adult dental coverage, therefore, would help improve employability and help reduce associated racial inequities in the job market.

Expanding oral health coverage is cost-effective and will support better overall health.

Poor oral health can have compounding effects for overall health, for instance by making chronic conditions like diabetes more difficult and expensive to manage. Oral health problems are also associated with dangerous and costly pregnancy complications. Because of these impacts on overall health, expanding Medicaid dental coverage will result in significant cost savings elsewhere, and would significantly offset the projected cost of the benefit (\$708 million annually). A new analysis by the ADA Health Policy Institute, Community Catalyst, and Families USA finds that extending Medicaid adult dental benefits could save at least \$273 million annually in medical costs related to diabetes, heart disease, and pregnancy. Greater access to dental care could reduce other unnecessary health spending, such as averting hospital emergency department visits for dental pain. This cost avoidance alone could save \$2 billion per year in U.S. health system costs.

A wide and growing array of experts and community leaders support lifting barriers to dental coverage. Building upon decades of work on this issue at the state and national levels, community leaders, health equity advocates and oral health stakeholders have actively voiced support for Medicaid oral health coverage to the Biden-Harris administration and Congress.

Our coalition believes that Congress should advance policies that make comprehensive oral health coverage for adults a permanent part of the Medicaid program for all states.

Including it in the Senate's Build Back Better package, lawmakers can promote a sustainable economic recovery and reduce vast health inequities by guaranteeing dental coverage to all adults who count on Medicaid, no matter where they live. For further discussion, contact Kristin LaRoche at klaroch@carequest.org. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

ADAP Advocacy Association
AIDS Alabama
AIDS Alliance for Women, Infants, Children, Youth & Families
AIDS Foundation Chicago
American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research
American Association of Public Health Dentistry
American Association on Health and Disability
American Dental Association
American Dental Education Association
American Dental Hygienists' Association
American Fluoridation Society
American Institute of Dental Public Health

American Public Health Association Oral Health Section
APHA Oral Health Section
Apple Tree Dental
Asian Resources, Inc
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care
Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors
Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors
Augusta Regional Dental Clinic
Black AIDS Institute
C.A.R.E. Clinic
California Dental Association
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health
Center for Medicare Advocacy
Choice in Aging
Community Access National Network (CANN)
Community Catalyst, Inc.
Dental Trade Alliance
DentaQuest
Department of Social Services, Health Services, Integrated Care
Douglas County Early Childhood Initiative
Early Childhood Dental Network
Eastern Shore Rural Health System
Erie Family Health Centers
Families USA
Greater Detroit Dental Hygienists' Association
Heartland Alliance
Hennepin Healthcare
Hispanic Dental Association
HIV Dental Alliance
Justice in Aging
Lakeshore Foundation
Latino Coalition for a Healthy California
Maryland Dental Action Coalition
Medicaid-Medicare-CHIP Services Dental Association
Medicare Rights Center
Michigan Dental Hygienists' Association
Minnesota Dental Hygienists' Association
Missouri Coalition for Oral Health
NASTAD
National Association of Dental Plans
National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
National Council on Aging
National Council on Independent Living

National Dental Association
National Dental Hygienists' Association
National Kidney Foundation
National Rural Health Association
Normandale Community College Dental Hygiene Program
Oral Health Progress and Equity Network (OPEN, Inc.)
Piedmont Regional Dental Clinic, Inc.
PlusInc
Project Accessible Oral Health
Public Health Dental
Santa Fe Group
Scarlett Consulting International an oral health outcomes company
Senior Charity Care Foundation
Shriver Center on Poverty Law
SisterLove, Inc.
Sjogren's Foundation
Smile America Partners
Southeast Michigan Senior Regional Collaborative
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network
Spina Bifida Association
The AIDS Institute
The Arc of Illinois
The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, Inc.
The Forsyth Institute
The Gerontological Society of America
The Law Office of Stacey Dembo
Thresholds
Tri-Area Community Health
Virginia Dental Association Foundation
Virginia Health Catalyst
Washtenaw Health Plan
West Central Initiative