

August 11, 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 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, Chairman Wyden, and Chairman Pallone:

As you develop solutions to recover from the pandemic, we urge you to prioritize a policy change to improve oral health in America: **extending guaranteed comprehensive dental coverage to all adults who rely on Medicaid for their health care**. Poor oral health hurts more than our mouths. It can impede an equitable and lasting economic recovery by harming our overall health, employability and financial security. By securing Medicaid dental coverage for adults, Congress can drive health and economic gains for families, states, and our nation.

We urge you and your colleagues to cosponsor and work to advance the Medicaid Dental Benefit Act (H.R. 4439) led by Congresswoman Barragàn, which would make comprehensive dental care a mandatory component of Medicaid coverage for adults in every state. As detailed below, ensuring Medicaid adult dental coverage is vital to advancing racial and economic equity; supporting employment and economic growth; improving people's overall health; and protecting our health care resources.

Oral health coverage is a glaring hole in Medicaid benefits that are otherwise a lifeline to millions of adults and families. Adult dental coverage is optional for state Medicaid programs. While children enrolled in Medicaid have guaranteed, comprehensive dental benefits, federal policy does not have similar standards for adults who rely on the program. As a result, oral health coverage for adults varies widely across states, and some states don't cover it at all. This puts care out of reach for millions of people, especially given that adults with low incomes confront the greatest cost barriers to oral health care out of any age or income group. In fact, cost barriers to dental care for adults have only increased in recent years, with Black and Hispanic communities reporting the highest financial hurdles to accessing the care they need.

Adding adult dental coverage to Medicaid is key to advancing racial, economic, and health justice. Lack of access to dental care is one of the most overlooked examples of health disparities today. As the pandemic laid bare, America's entrenched racial and economic inequities risk individual and community wellbeing. The very people who are also most likely to get sick or lose their job from COVID-19's health and economic crises also face the steepest structural and historic barriers to

dental services: people with low incomes; [Black, Hispanic](#), and other people of color; [tribal communities](#); people with disabilities; and those in rural America, among others.

Without access to affordable dental care, these communities are more likely to have poor oral health. For example, among adults facing cost barriers to dental care, [racial disparities](#) have widened in the last decade. This kind of structural obstacle has forced nearly twice as many Black and Mexican American adults to suffer from untreated cavities as white adults. Securing Medicaid oral health coverage for adults could alleviate needless suffering while also advancing equity.

When policy and cost barriers keep dental care out of reach, it threatens national prosperity. For many adults, being able to afford dental care could be the key to getting a new job, supporting their economic security. Yet three in ten working-age adults with lower incomes say that the appearance of their mouth and teeth affects their ability to interview for a job. The U.S. loses more than \$45 billion each year in productivity due to untreated dental disease.

Research shows, however, that Medicaid adult dental coverage can improve [employability](#), while reducing associated racial inequities in the job market. Good oral health can also increase [wages](#) for women in the workforce. These gains could be pivotal for people recovering from pandemic unemployment, which most hurt women and women of color.

Expanding oral health coverage is a cost-effective way to support better health at every age. Lacking access to dental care risks our overall health and wastes resources. Poor oral health can make chronic conditions, like diabetes, more difficult and expensive to manage. It may also cause dangerous and costly pregnancy complications, with risks to parents and children. But [new analysis](#) by the ADA Health Policy Institute, Community Catalyst, and Families USA finds that extending Medicaid adult dental benefits could lead to significant savings: With improved oral health, the policy could save at least \$273 million annually in medical costs related to diabetes, heart disease, and pregnancy. It could also lower overall state spending on dental care.

The new research, however, does not account for other key savings this policy would yield over time, meaning that the estimated price tag of \$535 million in federal spending is likely higher than what we would see in reality. For example, greater access to dental care would reduce other unnecessary health spending, such as averting hospital emergency department visits for dental pain. This could save the U.S. health system [\\$2 billion](#) per year.

A growing number 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 our support](#) for Medicaid oral health coverage to the Biden-Harris administration and Congress. For nearly a decade, the [American Dental Association](#) has also publicly supported making adult dental coverage a mandatory Medicaid benefit. We are encouraged by the President's FY 2022 budget, which recognizes the value of dental coverage in its proposal to add this benefit to Medicare. At the same time, policymakers must not neglect adults with low incomes who count on Medicaid.

Congress can and must advance federal policy that makes comprehensive oral health coverage for adults a permanent part of the Medicaid program for all states. Continuing to make dental

coverage inaccessible for some communities, including people of color, tribal communities, and adults with low incomes, harms us all. Oral health shapes our overall health and shared prosperity, and will influence the direction of our recovery from the pandemic.

By advancing the [Medicaid Dental Benefit Act](#), 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 Colin Reusch at creusch@communitycatalyst.org. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Californians for Community
Empowerment (ACCE) Action
AlohaCare
Al Tekreeti DMD, Inc.
American Association for Community Dental
Programs
American Dental Association
American Network of Oral Health Coalitions
Annapolis Pediatric Dentistry
APA Family Support Services
Apple Tree Dental
Arcora Foundation
Arizona Oral Health Coalition
Arkansas Department of Health, Office of Oral
Health
Arkansas Oral Health Coalition
Asian Resources, Inc.
Association of California Caregiver Resource
Centers
Association of State and Territorial Dental
Directors
Autism Society of America
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
California Black Health Network
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network
California Physicians Alliance (CaPA)
California Primary Care Association
CARECEN SF
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health
CavityFree SF
Center for Medicare Advocacy
Charles County Department of Health
Chase Brexton Health Care
Children's Action Alliance
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities

Community Catalyst, Inc.
Community Health Initiative of Orange
County
Community Health Trust
Connecticut Oral Health Initiative
Consumers for Affordable Health Care
County of San Diego HHS
Courage California
CRLA Foundation
Dental Lifeline Network
DentaQuest
Desert AIDS Project dba DAP Health
Diakonia
Dientes Community Dental Care
Easterseals
Edward T Reidy DDS, Profession Corp.
El Cajon Collaborative
Encompass Community Services
End Hep C SF
Escondido Dental Group
Families USA
Florida Voices for Health
Gary and Mary West Senior Dental Center
Health Access California
Health Care for the Homeless
Health Improvement Partnership of Santa
Cruz County
Hospice of Santa Cruz County
Idaho Oral Health Alliance
Imaginre Art
Island Liaison, Inc.
IUCC Advocates for Peace & Justice
Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles
Justice in Aging
Korean Community Center of the East Bay

Latino Coalition for a Healthy California
Laurel Bush Family Dentistry
Little Tokyo Service Center
Los Angeles LGBT Center
Louisiana Oral Health Coalition
MAGNUS
Maine Oral Health Coalition
Maine Primary Care Association
Maiuro
Maryland Area Health Education Center West
Maryland Assembly on School Based Health
Care
Maryland Community Health System
Maryland Dental Action Coalition
Maryland Dental Hygienists' Association
Medicaid | Medicare | CHIP Services Dental
Association
Michigan Oral Health Coalition
Mid-Atlantic Association of Community
Health Centers
Missouri Coalition for Oral Health
Montgomery County Dental Clinics
Mountain Park Health Center
MPact/Fijate Bien Program
National Association of Dental Plans
National Association of Social Workers
(NASW) California Chapter
National Coalition of Dentists for Health
Equity
National Multiple Sclerosis Society
Native American Connections
NC Child
NH Oral Health Coalition
NICOS Chinese Health Coalition
NJ Oral Health Coalition
Oral Health Kansas, Inc.
Oral Health Ohio

Oral Health Progress and Equity Network
(OPEN), Inc.
Orange County Equality Coalition
Orange County United Way
PA Coalition for Oral Health
Pacific Asian Counseling Services
Project Accessible Oral Health
Restaurant Opportunities Center United
Rockridge Mobile Health, Inc.
Salud Para La Gente
Santa Cruz Community Health
San Francisco AIDS Foundation
Senior Charity Care Foundation
Scenarios Unltd.
SFITCH Consulting LLC
ShoreUp! Inc./ HeadStart
South Asian Network
Southwestern College
Special Access Dental
Strategic Concepts in Organizing & Policy
(SCOPE)
Tennessee Justice Center
The Arc of the United States
The Courageous Resistance of the Desert
The Los Angeles Trust for Children's Health
Tiburcio Vásquez Health Center
United Health Organization
Utah Health Policy Project
Veritable Good
Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations
Virginia Health Catalyst
Wayne County Oral Health Coalition
Western Center on Law & Poverty
Women For: Orange County
Wyoming Dental Hygienists' Association
Y in Central Maryland Head Start/
Early Head Start
504HealthNet, Inc.