

January 27, 2022

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
United States Senate
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Sanders:

On behalf of our 162,000 dentist members, the American Dental Association (ADA) writes to commend you for your leadership on veterans' oral health care. The ADA has prioritized oral health equity for our nation's veterans, and appreciates the opportunity to share in your efforts towards improving veterans' oral health. We would also like to share with you some of the ways the ADA and dentists across the nation are addressing veterans' oral health care needs.

The ADA strongly supports Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Dentistry, where veterans receive comprehensive dental care benefits. Eligible veterans should be able to visit conveniently located VA dental clinics, and veterans across the country should have access to dentists. ADA was glad to see these issues addressed in sections 5 and 7 of your bill, the Veterans Dental Care Eligibility Expansion and Enhancement Act of 2021. As you know, section 5 of the bill would require VA to maintain a VA dental clinic in every state within one year of enactment of the bill. ADA wrote to you in support of your amendment to the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act that would have also required a VA dental clinic in every state. Section 7 would create a loan reimbursement program for qualified dentists who practice dentistry within the VA for five years or more at a high need location. The maximum reimbursement amount would be \$100,000 per dentist, \$20,000 per oral surgeon, and \$10,000 per dental hygienist participating in the program. ADA strongly believes that student loan relief is a powerful incentive for dentists to serve populations like veterans who suffer from disparities in oral health.

Like you, the ADA is committed to ensuring that veterans have access to oral health care. ADA policy supports authorization of resources within VA Medical Centers to assist veterans in identifying and utilizing dental services offered by federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), not for profit dental care facilities, and volunteer dental professionals. ADA policy also supports the work of component and constituent dental associations, dental organizations, societies and dentists to develop new programs with outreach strategies to assist veterans with unmet dental treatment needs, and to serve as a resource in finding dental homes for veterans.

The ADA has been deeply involved with the VA's oral health pilot program, VETSmile, from the start, VETSmile is a collaboration between the VA and community dental care providers to enhance Veterans' access to free and discounted dental services. ADA immediately

began collaborating with the VA Center for Care and Payment Innovation (CCPI) on finding dental practices that would be suitable for VETSmile partnership, and entered into a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with CCPI in 2021 as the VETSmile program was being officially launched. Under the MOA, the ADA advises CCPI on the scaling and implementation of VETSmile, and assists with VETSmile outreach efforts.

As of December 2021, over 800 eligible veterans had been referred for dental care through VETSmile, with around 600 unique VETSmile patients seen during 1,545 visits to dentists partnered with VETSmile, where over 3,000 dental procedures were performed. VETSmile is in various stages of development in 19 states, and is working with more than thirty potential partner dental schools and FQHCs. ADA frequently receives inquiries from its dentist members who are interested in working with veterans and has introduced CCPI to these potential partners, as well as to others who may be appropriate partners. ADA has also assisted with introductions to dental school and FQHC leadership.

The ADA will hold a “Give Veterans a Smile Summit” this spring with the goal of elevating the importance of veterans’ oral health in the dental community. More than fifty representatives of non-profit organizations, state and local dental societies, and individuals representing government entities that offer charitable oral health care to veterans have been invited to the summit. The ADA will disseminate what is learned from summit participants to its membership in order to increase awareness, and ultimately increase access to oral health services among veterans. The information gathered during the summit also has the potential to generate a more organized and calibrated approach for industry to support those organizations/programs providing charitable care to veterans.

In preparation for the summit, the ADA investigated the scope of the problem of veterans’ access to oral health care and the number and nature of programs addressing this problem. ADA found that there are numerous oral health-related charitable programs currently in existence for veterans across the U.S. Programs range from private dental office pro-bono programs, dental school outreach programs, dental association run programs, and even some programs managed under 501(c)3 non-profit organizations or foundations. The summit will seek to facilitate and amplify these programs.

Other goals and objectives of the summit include:

- Gathering data for a potential national database of charitable veterans’ oral health care organizations which would be available on ADA.org. This database would increase access to care by connecting veterans with organizations that offer charitable dental care, and by connecting dentists and clinicians with volunteer opportunities to care for veterans in need;
- Using data and information learned from the summit to advocate, in collaboration with the VA and other vested organizations, on a federal level for better access to care for veterans and oral health systems change;

- Facilitating the sharing of “best practices” of organizations/programs providing charitable oral health services to veterans among attendees and the public via the creation of a best practices document;
- Development of a continuing education course for dentists on veterans’ oral health;
- Discussion of opportunities and challenges, and how organizations and programs can better work together to provide care to the veteran population; and
- Determining what role a national organization like the ADA can have in ongoing efforts.

Ultimately, the Give Veterans a Smile summit has the potential to improve access to care for millions of veterans nationwide.

The nation’s dentists are proud to be able to serve the oral health needs of those who have served our country so well. We greatly appreciate your leadership in addressing veterans’ oral health, and stand ready to work with you to assist in improving the oral health of veterans in need.

Please contact Megan Mortimer at mortimerm@ada.org or (202) 701-9593 to facilitate further discussion.

Sincerely,

/s/

Cesar R. Sabates, D.D.S.
President

/s/

Raymond A. Cohlma, D.D.S.
Executive Director

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