

Recommendations

Oral Health America has developed a set of policy recommendations and actions based on the issues highlighted in *A State of Decay*. The purpose of these recommendations is to assist advocates to stimulate change by increasing awareness of the needs of seniors among state and federal decision-makers. The recommendations are available online as a guide, which can be downloaded at astateofdecay.org and tailored to fit states' specific needs. Among these online tools are key messages and talking points on how to communicate a state's score to policymakers and other stakeholders. Oral Health America is committed to working with state partners to use this report and the online tools to improve the oral health of older adults across the United States.

Based on the variables analyzed in this report, the following are Oral Health America's high-level policy recommendations.

ACTION

REINSTATE, ESTABLISH, OR MAINTAIN AN EXTENSIVE ADULT MEDICAID DENTAL BENEFIT

Background: More than 7 million older adults rely on the Medicaid program for their health insurance, and oral health benefits.⁶ Unfortunately, not all states offer extensive Medicaid dental coverage for adults — including older adults. Dental coverage is an optional benefit under Medicaid and each state determines the extent of coverage. Funding for the dental benefit is also subject to cuts or elimination by state lawmakers each year during budget negotiations. Low-income older adults have few or no other coverage options. If Medicaid does not provide the dental benefit these low-income older adults need, they are left at risk of tooth decay, other serious medical problems,⁷ and unaffordable out-of-pocket expenses.⁸

Coverage: A Key to Access and Health. Almost 50% of older adults cite cost as the primary reason they do not visit the dentist, and this percentage skyrockets to 69% of low-income adults.⁹ Providing coverage reduces this barrier to getting care, and realizing improved oral health. Older adults with a dental benefit are 2.5 times more likely to visit the dentist on a regular basis.¹⁰ The results of the state analysis in this volume of *A State of Decay* shows better oral health is associated with higher levels of recent visits to the dentist.

Costly, Ineffective Alternatives. Without Medicaid dental coverage, older adults are left to seek care in hospital emergency departments, where care is typically limited to pain relief or a meager supply of antibiotics for infection. While ineffective, the average cost of an emergency department dental visit is \$749.

For older adults, the cost of dental care in the emergency department is twice that of younger groups, and the dental needs often remain unresolved.¹¹ Studies show that emergency department–related dental visits significantly increase when states eliminate Medicaid dental coverage.¹²

Comprehensive Medicaid dental coverage saves states money. With a comprehensive dental benefit, those who receive oral health coverage through Medicaid for health coverage will experience fewer oral health–related emergency visits,¹² reduce medical costs of chronic diseases and other health issues,¹³ and thus reduce healthcare costs within the Medicaid program.

ACTION

INTEGRATE COMPREHENSIVE DENTAL COVERAGE IN MEDICARE

Background: Currently, 55 million Americans access healthcare services through Medicare; however, Medicare does not cover routine or preventive dental services.

Consumers Want Coverage. Despite cost concerns, 93% of older adults claim dental coverage is a top priority compared with other non-covered services such as long-term care, vision, and hearing.¹⁴

Oral Health Impacts Overall Health. Individuals with chronic conditions who regularly received recommended dental care, cleanings, or periodontal treatment saved an average of \$1,307 on their medical claims compared with those with chronic conditions who did not receive recommended dental care or received no dental care at all.¹⁵

Quality of Life. Older adults believe teeth impact more than health. Poor oral health affects your image and how you feel about yourself.¹⁴

ACTION

SUSTAIN OR EXPAND COMMUNITY WATER FLUORIDATION

Background: Community water fluoridation is the controlled adjustment of fluoride in a public water supply to optimal concentration. It is beneficial across the lifespan, helping prevent tooth decay among all members of the community.

Prevention First. Community water fluoridation is the most simple, equitable, cost-effective way for millions of Americans to protect their teeth and receive preventive oral health care.¹⁶

Cost-Effective. For most cities, every \$1 invested in water fluoridation saves \$38 in dental treatment costs.¹⁷

Publicly Recognized. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named the “fluoridation of drinking water” as one of “10 great public health achievements” of the 20th century.^{4,16}

ACTION

INCLUDE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES FOR OLDER ADULTS IN ALL STATE ORAL HEALTH PLANS

Background: Adopting a SOHP with specific language to improve the oral health of older adults illustrates a states’ strategic prioritization of older adults in their communities.

Strategy to Improve Health. A SOHP is key to establishing a vision for improving the oral health and well-being of the citizens of a state and its local communities, developing policies, and targeting actions.¹⁸

Population Health Approach. A SOHP enables a state to design a comprehensive, integrated approach to meeting the oral health needs of the state’s population through oral health promotion and disease prevention and control.¹⁸

ACTION

CONDUCT BASIC SCREENING SURVEYS OF OLDER ADULTS IN ALL STATES

Background: The BSS is a tool to help monitor the oral health conditions of state residents and should include older adults. The Association of State of Territorial Dental Directors has developed a Basic Screening Survey to provide a common tool for oral health surveillance.

Data-Driven Decisions. Data from a public health surveillance system can be used to measure the burden of a disease, identify populations at high risk, and identify new or emerging health concerns. This allows states to make informed decisions, backed by BSS data, regarding the oral health of their older adults.¹⁹

Data Comparisons. By collecting data in a consistent manner, states can compare their data with data collected by other organizations, agencies, or states.¹⁹

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