

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](mailto: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