



# Protect Washington's Medicaid Adult Dental Benefit

Cutting the Adult Dental Benefit Will Further Hurt the Communities Impacted Most by COVID-19, and Will Cost the State Millions

### Eliminating adult dental coverage now will hurt Washingtonians who are already hit hardest by the pandemic.

- More than 1 million low-income adults will lose comprehensive dental coverage.
- Those most at risk from COVID-19—communities of color, adults with chronic health conditions, and older adults—already experience health inequities and will further suffer if Medicaid dental coverage is eliminated.
- Oral health is essential to overall health. Dental disease can be prevented; however, untreated oral disease leads to inflammation, infection, and pain. Oral disease has serious consequences on chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, pneumonia, and pregnancy complications.<sup>i</sup> Diabetes and heart disease are major risk factors for COVID-19.<sup>ii</sup>
- Adults who are missing teeth can face additional issues such as tissue damage and jaw problems that can make future treatment more expensive.
- Children are less likely to access dental care when their parents or caregivers lack coverage.<sup>iii</sup>

### Cutting the Medicaid adult dental benefit does not make financial sense.

- Only about 30% of the Medicaid adult dental program cost is covered by state funds. If Washington eliminates this program, we would be turning away approximately \$100 million in federal support over the 2021-23 biennium.<sup>iv</sup> Any “savings” would be significantly offset by lost federal dollars and increased care costs.
- Without access to regular dental care, hospital emergency departments (EDs) become the only option for many Medicaid-insured adults experiencing severe dental pain and infections. Patients without teeth can wind up in EDs due to an inability to chew and properly digest their food. A 2011 study found that dental-related ED visits in Washington resulted in \$36 million in costs over 18 months.<sup>v</sup> Dental problems are the 3rd most common reason for an ED visit by uninsured patients.<sup>vi</sup>

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## Good oral health is an essential component of Washington's economic recovery.

- Without comprehensive dental coverage, more than 1 million Washingtonians may not be able to afford the dental care they need to eat, work, regain employment, and stay healthy. More than one in four low-income Washingtonians report that the condition of their teeth has negatively impacted their ability to interview for a job.<sup>vii</sup>

## Washingtonians will face long-term consequences if the Medicaid adult dental benefit is eliminated, even if it is later restored.

- Medicaid adult dental was cut in 2011. By the time it was restored in 2014, many patients faced an accumulation of costly, severe problems, including long-term pain, broken teeth, tooth abscesses, unnecessary extractions, and gum disease. In addition, low income patients were able to get problem teeth removed in emergency rooms but were given no means to replace their missing teeth.
- We know from experience that it takes years to rebuild Medicaid access for adults after the benefit has been eliminated and subsequently restored. Inconsistent adult dental coverage keeps patients from accessing needed care, makes it difficult for providers to participate in the program, and undermines the sustainability of our community health center system.
- The stakes are even higher now: eliminating adult dental would impact far more Washingtonians than in 2011, as adult Medicaid enrollment has more than doubled to more than 1 million.

### Additional Resources

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9. Current Oral Health Reports. March 2019, Volume 6, Issue 1, pp 1-8
10. Lewis CW et al. "Visits to U.S. emergency departments by 20-29 year olds with toothache during 2001-2010. *J Am Dent Assoc* 2015; 146(5): 295-302

### Endnotes

- i <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/treating-gum-disease-may-lessen-burden-heart-disease-diabetes-conditions-201407237293>;  
<https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/publications/features/pregnancy-and-oral-health.html>
- ii <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>
- iii <https://www.cbpp.org/research/health/medicaid-works-for-children>;  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4821415/>
- iv <https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/budget/statebudget/savings/107HCA-HBE.pdf>
- v <https://arcorafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Potentially-Avoidable-Emergency-Room-Use.pdf>
- vi <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4418214/>
- vii <https://www.ada.org/en/science-research/health-policy-institute/oral-health-and-well-being/Washington-facts>

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