

September 7, 2019

Bipartisan Policy Center
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Submitted electronically: ruralhealth@bipartisanpolicy.org

Re: Rural Health Policy Solutions

Greetings:

We appreciate the Bipartisan Policy Center's Rural Task Force seeking input on policy solutions to improve access to rural healthcare. Justice in Aging and Families USA have been working to improve rural access to oral health. Dental coverage is largely unavailable or extremely limited for many rural residents, there are fewer dental providers, and treatment is costly. As a result, rural residents are unable to access oral health care impacting their overall health. For example, twenty percent of rural seniors have not seen a dentist or visited a dental clinic for more than five years compared to 14 percent of non-rural seniors. Consequently, 1 in 5 rural seniors have had all their teeth pulled exacerbating chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease.¹

Add a Dental Benefit to Medicare

Approximately one-fifth of America's rural residents are 65 and over. Unfortunately, original Medicare does not include a dental benefit and, as a consequence, most older adults lack or have very limited oral health coverage. Adding a comprehensive dental benefit to Medicare would provide oral health coverage to most older adults as well as younger Medicare beneficiaries with disabilities whose oral health needs are currently unmet.²

Rural communities comprise 66 percent of the nation's dental health professional shortage areas.³ Adding a dental benefit to Medicare would also act to attract more oral health providers to rural regions since Medicare would provide reimbursement for oral health services to a significant portion of rural residents who previously lacked the means to pay for oral health treatment.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data. Atlanta, Ga.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016. Analyzed by DentaQuest Institute.

² Oral Health America, "An Oral Health Benefit in Medicare Part B: It's Time to Include Oral Health in Health Care," (July 2018), available at <https://www.justiceinaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Medicare-Dental-White-Paper.pdf>; Families USA, "For Rural Seniors, Improving Overall Health Requires Improving Oral Health Care," (Dec. 2018), available at <https://familiesusa.org/product/rural-seniors-improving-overall-health-requires-improving-oral-health-care>; Justice in Aging, "Creating an Oral health Benefit in Medicare: A Statutory Analysis," (Jan. 2019), available at <https://www.justiceinaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Creating-an-Oral-Health-Benefit-in-Medicare-A-Statutory-Analysis.pdf>.

³ Rural Health Information Hub, Health professional shortage areas: Dental care (2017 map) available at <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/rural-maps/mapfiles/hpsa-dental-care.jpg>.

There is bipartisan support to add a dental benefit to Medicare. This year, four federal pieces of legislation have been introduced to add a dental benefit to Medicare Part B demonstrating the momentum and support the policy has garnered.⁴

Expand Medicaid Coverage

Oral health coverage should also be expanded through the Medicaid program. Rural residents are more likely to depend on Medicaid for their health insurance coverage. This is because people living in rural areas are less likely to be employed, are more likely to have a disability, and are more likely to be low-income compared to those in urban and suburban regions.⁵ Unfortunately, adult dental is an optional benefit under the Medicaid program. Consequently, three states provide no dental coverage, 12 states only cover dental services to relieve pain in emergency situations, and 17 states provide only limited coverage.⁶ Many of the states with large rural populations do not offer extensive dental under their Medicaid programs. Tens of millions of low-income adults would have access to dental services and better health outcomes if Medicaid were to include an adult dental benefit.⁷

Increase Access to Oral Health in Institutional Settings

Residents of nursing facilities face significant and unique barriers in accessing oral health coverage, and the impact on their oral health and overall health is substantial. Outcomes are poorer for residents residing in facilities in rural regions. For example, a recent California-based study found older adults residing in nursing homes in rural counties were 10% more likely to have untreated tooth decay than their urban counterparts and also have more teeth that are untreated.⁸ Residents in rural counties were also more likely to have untreated gum disease, have lost all their natural teeth, and twice as likely not to have dentures compared to their urban counterparts. We strongly encourage the taskforce to consider models tailored to delivering dental services in institutional settings⁹ and consider increased training requirements for care staff to both identify oral health needs and perform oral hygiene to improve the oral health of facility residents.

Provide Services Where People Are

Lack of transportation is a significant barrier to care in rural areas. Providing dental services where older adults are, including in senior centers,¹⁰ at home, and in nursing facilities, improves access to care. We

⁴ Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2019 (Cardin, S. 22); Companion House Bill Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2019 (Barragan, HR 2951); Medicare Dental, Vision & hearing Benefit Act of 2019 (Doggett, HR 1393); Seniors Have Eyes, Ears, and Teeth Act (Roybal-Allard, HR 576); Medicare and Medicaid Dental, Vision, and Hearing Benefit Act of 2019 (Casey, S. 1423).

⁵ Kaiser Family Foundation, "The Role of Medicaid in Rural America," (Apr. 2017), available at <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/the-role-of-medicaid-in-rural-america/>.

⁶ Center for Health Care Strategies, "Medicaid Adult Dental Benefits: An Overview," (Nov. 2018), available at www.chcs.org/media/Adult-Oral-Health-Fact-Sheet_112118.pdf.

⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation, Full-Benefit Medicaid Enrollees by Enrollment Group, (FY 2014), available at www.kff.org/medicaid/state-indicator/distribution-of-full-benefit-medicaid-enrollees-by-enrollment-group/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D.

⁸ Center for Oral Health, "A Healthy Smile Never Gets Old: A California Report on the Oral Health of Older Adults," (2018), available at www.centerfororalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Oral-Health-of-Older-Adults.pdf.

⁹ See, for example, Apple Tree Dental, available at https://oralhealth.acl.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/Apple_Tree_Dental.pdf.

¹⁰ See for example, the Gary and Mary West Senior Dental Center, available at <https://www.servingseniors.org/what-we-do/gary-mary-west-senior-wellness-center/overview.html>.

recommend encouraging the provision of services through teledentistry and innovative models like the virtual dental home.¹¹

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of these policy proposals in more detail, please feel free to contact Amber Christ with Justice in Aging at achrist@justiceinaging.org.

Sincerely,

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¹¹ Virtual Dental Home, available at https://oralhealth.acl.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/Virtual_Dental_Home.pdf.