



Preventive Care Reduces Costs, Boosts Self-Sufficiency

RESTORE MEDICAID ADULT DENTAL SERVICES WITH ONGOING FUNDS

Summary

Low-income adults do not have the financial resources to pay for dental services out of pocket. Without help, most will either go without or delay care until once treatable conditions become emergent (ER care is typically 4 times more expensive). Poor oral health can lead to nutritional and other systemic health problems. Affordable dental care is also crucial for low-income adults who are often employed in the service sector, where appearance is paramount. For these and other reasons, the Legislature should restore dental services to adults enrolled in Medicaid.

Key Facts

In Utah the income levels at which adults qualify for Medicaid are very low. The typical “aged/disabled” Medicaid recipient gets income from SSI (social security income), about \$851 a month for an individual. After rent, food, utilities, etc., there is nothing left over to pay for care out-of-pocket.

According to the National Institutes of Health, proper dental care helps to prevent other serious and more expensive medical problems:

- Periodontal (gum) disease makes it harder for diabetics to control their blood sugar levels, thus contributing to diabetes complications.
- Untreated tooth decay can lead to systemic infections, compromised immune function, and heart problems.
- Insurance status is an important factor in determining use of emergency departments for a dental complaint, according to the national Access to Care Survey: 22.6% of the uninsured reported unmet dental needs compared to 5.9% of those with private health insurance.
- Due to dental related illness:
 - Utah children miss over 500,000 school hours;

Over 1.6 million work hours are lost in Utah every year (Utah Oral Health Coalition).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why should dental services be restored, despite the imminent economic downturn?

Utah is headed into an economic downturn. This is bad news for the state budget, but even worse for those in our state who are already suffering economically and must turn to Medicaid to help get them back on their feet. The Health and Human Services Sub-Appropriations Committee ranked dental services very well (#12) on their combined priority list. However, given the finite number of dollars that will be allocated, the Executive Appropriation Committee should move dental services up the list and appropriate the \$2.8 million that is required to make sure that Utah’s most vulnerable citizens can get the care they need.

Won’t the funding for dental services be difficult to sustain in future years?

Dental services are a wise investment. These truly are wellness and primary care services that, if provided now, will fend off much more expensive future costs. Adult dental services comprise only .002% of total state Medicaid spending; hardly worth going after for savings. To find substantial savings (and improved health outcomes), policy makers should stay on the path of proven cost management strategies—like the PDL and ‘medical home’ initiatives.

Can’t charity care system meet the need?

No. Utah’s charity care systems are not equipped to meet the full needs of Medicaid clients and the uninsured. In the absence of a plan for covering Utah’s estimated 420,000 uninsured, charity care systems should concentrate their resources on the uninsured.