

Lawmakers looking to restore dental benefits to Utah's disabled, blind

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SALT LAKE CITY — The University of Utah School of Dentistry has agreed to help foot the bill for a specific population of patients — those who are disabled and/or blind — if the state would again offer dental benefits under Medicaid.

The last time Medicaid patients were offered dental benefits was in 2009, and roughly half of them took advantage of the available services. Sen. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, along with Rep. Steve Eliason, R-Sandy, plan to introduce a bill to the Legislature that would reinstate dental benefits for the disabled and blind population of Medicaid enrollees.

"It's a partial restoration of dental benefits that was previously offered to a broader population," Eliason told members of the state's [Health Reform Task Force](#) on Thursday. He said approximately 40,000 Utahns could benefit from the reinstatement of certain benefits.

The [U.'s dental school](#), as well as [Roseman University of Health Sciences](#), have agreed to provide dental services to the population, with at least the U. so far agreeing to help pay the state's portion of the cost while accepting federal reimbursement. A representative from Roseman said the private school in South Jordan would consider a similar agreement.

Dr. Glen Hanson, dental school dean at the U., said the school has a charge to "help deal with dental or oral health issues in the community."

"We believe oral health care is a critical factor in providing essential care for overall health," he said, adding that a person's mouth is often the site of potentially harmful infection, disorder and disease that can be curtailed with proper care.

Hanson noted a belief, qualified by research, that students who are not exposed to a needy population during their education are not likely to serve them in practice.

"We want them to come out with that feeling of attachment and a need to work with this population and serve them throughout their professional careers," Hanson said.

Eliason said he anticipates increased usage of the benefit in the first couple years, due to pent-up demand. Included in the bill is a provision that the program would be discontinued if federal reimbursement rates drop below 65 percent, whereas rates currently hover around 70 percent.

The task force accepted the bill as a committee, though lawmakers will address it during the upcoming session of the full Legislature, which convenes in January.

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