



Fact Sheet

Medicaid Adult Dental Coverage

January 2010

The Medicaid adult dental program served approximately 126,000 persons in 2009. Covered services include a wide range of preventive, restorative and emergency procedures. The program currently costs \$39 million per year, including a federal match rate exceeding 60%. This funding fails to meet the demand, due to previous reductions and the exclusion of many key procedures. Yet the Governor's budget proposes to *eliminate* coverage for all non-emergency dental care, forcing people to delay care, experience excruciating pain and use emergency rooms for avoidable health problems.

Washington State's community health centers (CHCs) are the health care home for over 630,000 patients, including about one-quarter of the state's uninsured population. In 2008, CHCs provided dental care to over 37,000 Medicaid-eligible adults—representing over one-quarter of all Medicaid adult dental users. However, due to the rising uninsured population and limited resources, CHC dental programs already find it difficult to meet the growing demand for primary dental care, especially for adults.

Dental care is an essential component of overall health care. Periodontal disease has been linked to cancer, vascular disease, and diabetes, and can lead to complications and low-birth weight babies if left untreated during pregnancy. Dental treatment is required to prevent the side effects of some medications and prior to chemotherapy, organ transplants and immune suppressive treatment. Preventive dental care improves the overall health of pregnant women and may reduce the risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes.¹ Many adult Medicaid recipients are severely disabled with congenital or acquired conditions that make them more vulnerable to oral health disease. They are indigent and often frail, elderly, in nursing homes, and unable to eat normally without routine oral health care.

Eliminating dental access increases health costs and harms our state's economy. Oral health issues result in higher costs, reduced productivity and persistent unemployment. Adults with dental pain are unable to chew food, avoid smiling to mitigate embarrassment, miss work because of toothaches, or are unemployable due to missing teeth. In the absence of routine primary dental care, untreated dental decay can spread life-threatening infections to the rest of the body, requiring costly hospitalization. Reducing or eliminating dental coverage for adults would only shift the burden to costly emergency room or hospital care. Without Medicaid adult dental, these patients will visit expensive hospital emergency rooms with acute dental problems, but will get little relief from the underlying physical problems since most hospitals cannot fix dental problems—they can only prescribe drugs that ameliorate the immediate pain and infection. Treating oral disease in this way only prolongs the problem and cost.

Current services do not meet the need in Washington. Medicaid adult dental funding reductions in the past decade have put a significant strain on safety net providers who already treat thousands of adults unable to afford dental care. The medically uninsured are soaring in this weakened economy; it has been estimated that the number of people without dental coverage is 2.5 times higher than those without medical coverage. Eliminating the Medicaid adult dental program when millions of Washingtonians are already going without dental insurance would be devastating. It would also threaten the CHC dental care infrastructure that took years to build. Recruiting staff is already a challenge—it would be difficult to restore capacity after cuts in funding or services.

¹ Timothé P, Eke PI, Presson SM, Malvitz DM. "Dental care use among pregnant women in the United States" reported in 1999 and 2002. *Prev Chronic Dis.* http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2005/jan/04_0069.htm.