



MICHIGAN SENIORS DESERVE ORAL HEALTH COVERAGE UNDER MEDICARE

2019 Federal Policy Statement

CALL TO ACTION

Older adults are projected to outnumber kids for the first time in U.S. history. In 2030, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that Michigan seniors will edge out children in population size: People age 65 and over are expected to number 2.3 million, while children under age 18 will number 2 million.

Medicare currently covers almost no oral health care. As a result, two-thirds of the two million Michiganders who rely on Medicare aren't getting the dental care they need. Here's how seniors are suffering:

Without coverage for prevention and care, seniors are at great risk for tooth decay and disease.

- Nationally, nearly three out of five seniors, and more than three-fourths of low-income seniors, do not visit a dentist during a typical year.¹
- In Michigan, more than one in 10 older adults suffer from untreated tooth decay; nearly one in eight have lost all of their natural teeth.

Untreated oral health problems have grave health consequences.

- Oral infections can spread to other parts of the body, such as the heart. Further, it is not safe to undergo many medical procedures when a person has an untreated oral health problem.²
- In Michigan, 149 seniors aged 65 and older were hospitalized due to a dental issue. High rates of avoidable hospitalizations in a community may be an indicator of a lack or failure of prevention efforts, a provider shortage, or other factors that create barriers to obtaining timely and effective care.³



Ninety-three percent of adults age 50 and over want Medicare to include dental coverage — and voters are willing to support it. An August 2017 poll showed that 86% of all ages favored adding dental insurance to Medicare.

The out-of-pocket cost of dental care is prohibitive for people living on fixed incomes.

- Nationally, seniors of all income levels cite costs as the top reason for not visiting a dentist.⁴
- Among low-income seniors, nearly 70% say that costs kept them from visiting a dentist in the last year.⁴

A Medicare oral health benefit would be a wise investment.

- A comprehensive Medicare dental benefit would be the most straightforward way to provide coverage that will keep seniors healthier and reduce other health care costs. At least four studies have found that providing oral health care to people with chronic illnesses reduces other medical costs, such as those associated with hospitalizations and emergency room visits.⁵

Sources

- ¹ Kaymar Nasseh and Marko Vujicic, *Dental Care Utilization Steady Among Working-Age Adults and Children, Up Slightly Among the Elderly* (American Dental Association Health Policy Institute, 2016), available online at http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIBrief_1016_1.pdf; American Dental Association Health Policy Institute, "Dental Care Utilization in the U.S." infographic, available online at http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIgraphic_1117_2.pdf?la=en.
- ² Cheryl Fish-Parcham, "Medicare Should Pay for Oral Health Care That Is Necessary to Manage Serious Illnesses" (Families USA, August 29, 2017), available online at <https://familiesusa.org/blog/2017/08/medicare-should-pay-oral-health-care-necessarymanage-serious-illnesses>.
- ³ Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Vital Records, 2016 <http://www.mdch.state.mi.us/pha/osr/chi/profiles/frame.asp>
- ⁴ American Dental Association Health Policy Institute, "Oral Health and Well-Being Among Seniors in the United States," available online at http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIgraphic_0916_2.pdf?la=en.
- ⁵ Harold C. Slavkin, "A National Imperative: Oral Health Services in Medicare," *Journal of the American Dental Association* 148, no. 5 (May 2017): 281-283, available online at [http://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177\(17\)30233-7/fulltext](http://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177(17)30233-7/fulltext).

