

The Need to Protect Medicaid Adult Dental Coverage Across States



Medicaid is a critical lifeline for dental care for people with disabilities, children, older adults, and families with low incomes. An estimated 23 million adults rely on Medicaid for dental care, but new provisions from the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act* (OBBBA) put this access at risk.¹ States are not required to cover adult dental benefits under Medicaid. As a result, dental services are often the first benefit states cut when they face budget pressures. Several states have already proposed cuts to adult dental benefits in response to budget pressures posed by OBBBA, including Massachusetts, Colorado, Virginia, and Idaho.

The Consequences of Cutting Medicaid Adult Dental Benefits

Access to oral health care remains out of reach for many low-income families, with cost as a primary barrier. Without stable, comprehensive dental benefits, Medicaid enrollees, particularly people with disabilities and residents of rural communities, are more vulnerable to preventable conditions that worsen overall health and increase system-wide costs.

- **Cost as a Barrier:** Lower-income adults are significantly less likely to be able to access dental care than higher-income individuals. Among adults earning \$100,000+ annually, 84% report a dental visit in the past year. For those earning \$30,000 or less annually, the rates drop to 52%.²
- **Economic Burden:** Medicaid could save up to 14% in costs for patients with diabetes, amounting to average annual savings of approximately \$2,918 per person, by covering periodontal care for all enrolled adults.³
- **Employment Consequences:** Nearly 18% of all adults reported that the appearance of their mouth and teeth affected their ability to interview for a job, with this figure rising to 29% among those with lower incomes.⁴

- **Coverage Cuts Have Lasting Consequences:** Previous experience with states eliminating adult dental benefits shows that these cuts are associated with a 37% drop in dental visits and a 60% increase in uninsurance, increased out-of-pocket spending, and long-term consequences such as edentulism.⁵

Protect Access to Essential Oral Health Care

As additional Medicaid changes from OBBBA are implemented, they could unintentionally eliminate access to dental services, especially for adults who depend on these benefits to stay healthy and avoid more costly care later.

- Policymakers should focus on preserving reliable funding and ensuring adult dental coverage remains available so people can get preventive care and keep overall health care costs down.



29%

of adults with low income said they had difficulty getting a job due to the appearance of their teeth.



By maintaining stable Medicaid funding for comprehensive dental benefits, policymakers can improve oral health outcomes, increase employment opportunities, and reduce long-term health care spending on chronic disease management and emergency department use.



References

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