Connecting Older Adults to Oral Health

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Justice in Aging is a national organization that uses the power of law to fight senior poverty by securing access to affordable health care, economic security, and the courts for older adults with limited resources.

Since 1972 we’ve focused our efforts primarily on populations that have traditionally lacked legal protection such as women, people of color, LGBT individuals, and people with limited English proficiency.
To achieve Justice in Aging, we must:

• Acknowledge systemic racism and discrimination

• Address the enduring negative effects of racism and differential treatment

• Promote access and equity in economic security, health care, and the courts for our nation’s low-income older adults

• Recruit, support, and retain a diverse staff and board, including race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation, disability, age, economic class

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Agenda

• Why Oral Health Matters
• Coverage Options
• Other Resources
• Discussion
Older Adults Access to Oral Health

• 65% of Medicare beneficiaries have NO dental coverage
  
  37 million people

• Nearly 50% did not visit the dentist in last year

• Major disparities based on race, income, disability, rural versus urban
  
  • 71% of Black & 65% of Hispanic Medicare beneficiaries did not see dentist in last year (versus 43% white)
  • 70% with income below $10K (versus 27% with $40K)
  • 62% of beneficiaries under 65 with a disability
  • 59% in rural region (versus 46% in metro areas)

• Cost is biggest barrier to care

San Diego Seniors & Oral Health

- 374,000 older adults in San Diego
- 96,633 Medicare & Medi-Cal dually enrolled
- No county-level data on seniors
- San Diego Oral Health Coalition
- Statewide:
  - Medi-Cal Dental: ¼ had an annual exam; 14% preventive; 18% any dental treatment
  - Nursing homes: 1/3 have lost all teeth; 1/3 need immediate gum treatment; 48% have untreated tooth decay
Oral Health Matters

Oral health and overall health are linked

- 15% of older adults have no natural teeth
- Periodontal disease = increased risk for infections & hospital admissions for aspiration pneumonia, & exacerbates chronic conditions
- Older adults take more medications that cause dry mouth that worsen oral health
It’s All Connected

THE MENTAL HEALTH — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Any serious or chronic pain issue can hamper mental health and daily life. If there is a painful injury or illness in the mouth, it’s likely to get in the way of normal functions like smiling, eating, or talking — and also take a toll on mood.

THE FAMILY HEALTH — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Babies naturally pick up bacteria from their surroundings that builds the immune system. Relatives with healthy mouths pass on helpful bacteria to babies, but if there is untreated oral disease in the family, infants can be exposed to the germs that cause cavities.

THE MEDICINE — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Some medications — like decongestants, antihistamines, or painkillers — can cause a dry mouth. Because saliva protects the mouth from the harmful bacteria that cause cavities and gum disease, the dry mouth “side effect” is one way that issues in other parts of the body influence oral health.

THE IMMUNE SYSTEM — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Because the mouth is an important part of the immune system, a healthy mouth boosts the body’s ability to protect against disease. Autoimmune diseases, like Celiac disease or lupus, can cause swelling in the mouth. In turn, inflammation can set off other health problems.

THE VITAL ORGAN — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Endocarditis, a heart infection, is often caused when bacteria from another part of the body gets into the bloodstream and spreads to the heart. It is also possible for infections in the mouth to spread to the brain. This is why gum disease is a serious infection that shouldn’t be ignored.

THE DIABETES — MOUTH-HEALTH CONNECTION
Diabetes can harm the mouth and problems in the mouth make it harder to control diabetes. Uncontrolled blood sugar can cause swollen gums, which disrupts the mouth’s natural defenses and makes cavities more likely. That’s why oral health care is an important part of diabetes management.
Data Collection!

• Assess unmet needs – by region, residence type (e.g. community versus institutional); race, ethnicity
Older Americans Act Funding

• Senior centers and other OAA funded organizations can conduct oral health screenings
• Need funding
• Referral processes
AB 2207 Requirements

• Dental screening in health assessment
• Ensure that members are referred to an appropriate Medi-Cal dental provider
• Identify plan liaisons available to dental managed care contractors and dental fee-for-service contractors to assist with referrals to health plan covered services

WIC sec. 14149.8(g)
Other Health Plan Best Practices

• Include oral health questions in HRA
• Education of health plan (internal)
  • Member Services
  • Care Coordinators
• Develop relationships with dental providers accepting patients (& Dental Managed Care Plans in LA & Sacramento Counties)
• Educate entire provider network
  • Oral health importance and referral process
  • Medi-Cal Dental Program case management program
    https://www.denti-cal.ca.gov/DC_documents/providers/provider_bulletins/Volume_34_Number_23.pdf
• Outreach to members on their oral health benefits
  • Mailings
  • Telephone hold line
  • Initial plan onboarding

• Include oral health in chronic disease prevention and health promotion activities of the plan

• Provider application of fluoride varnish
Providers

• Increase enrollment in Medi-Cal Dental
• Utilize other provider types: e.g. RDHAPs
Don’t forget Nursing Homes

• Facilities are directly responsible for the oral health needs of their residents

• Required to assist residents in obtaining both routine and 24-hour emergency dental care. These needs and how they are to be addressed must be included in the care planning process
  • Required to have a contract arrangement with a dentist or employing a staff dentist.
  • If resident unable to pay for dental services, facility required to attempt to find alternative care or funding.
  • Required to ensure access to routine care; and if necessary or requested, assist resident in making dental appointments & arranging transportation to and from dental services.
Supporting Federal Opportunities for Advocacy

Adding a Dental Benefit to Medicare Part B

- Integrates oral health into medical benefit – treated the same way as other health services in Medicare
- Payment structure would look the same (e.g. 20% co-insurance; preventive services no co-insurance)
- Provider payment would be adjusted by region and subject to annual stakeholder comment like other services under Part B
- Low-Income Protections would apply to help pay for out-of-pocket costs
Opportunities for Advocacy

Legislative Efforts

• Statutory changes to the Social Security Act must be made to add dental to Medicare
  • Removal of the exclusion for dental services
  • Definitions added

• 2019 Legislation
  • Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2019 (Cardin, S. 22)
    • Companion House Bill Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2019 (Barragan, HR 2951)
  • Medicare Dental, Vision & hearing Benefit Act of 2019 (Doggett, HR 1393)
  • Seniors Have Eyes, Ears, and Teeth Act (Roybal-Allard, HR 576)
  • Medicare and Medicaid Dental, Vision, and Hearing Benefit Act of 2019 (Casey, S. 1423)
Opportunities for Advocacy

Medically Necessary Dental Advocacy

• Administrative Advocacy with CMS to expand scope of when Medicare can pay for dental services that are integral to an underlying medical condition or procedure
  • Example: car accident in which the jaw was broken and several teeth lost. Medicare paid for reconstruction of the jaw, but refused to pay for extractions of teeth and the crowns to save the teeth he had damaged.

• Over 115 orgs have signed onto community statement for CMS to change interpretation of policy

• House and Senate Letters to CMS last fall

• Meeting with HHS/CMS to change policy
Beneficiary Pamphlet

https://advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/policy-and-research/health-justice/health-resources
Additional Resources


- Share Your Medicare Story, [www.oralhealth4all.org](http://www.oralhealth4all.org)

- Smile California, [http://smilecalifornia.org/](http://smilecalifornia.org/)

- Medi-Cal Dental, [https://www.denti-cal.ca.gov](https://www.denti-cal.ca.gov)

