



February 5, 2021

The Honorable Benjamin Cardin
509 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nanette Barragán
2246 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Cardin and Representative Barragán:

On behalf of the Medicare Oral Health Coalition— which includes leading organizations representing oral health, health care consumers, older adults, people with disabilities, patients, providers, industry, social service, and others-- we are writing to express our support for your legislation, the Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2021, which amends title XVIII of the Social Security Act to provide for coverage of dental services under the Medicare program.

Extending Medicare to include oral health coverage is critical to an effective pandemic response, economic recovery, and health equity. Two-thirds of older adults and people with disabilities who rely on the Medicare program, often living on fixed incomes, do not have any source of oral health coverage. These individuals struggle to afford and receive the oral health care services they need to stay healthy. The data is clear that when people face barriers to getting the oral health services they need, their overall health suffers. Lack of oral health care affects not just oral health conditions, but also other health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity – all of which increase a person’s risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19. In fact, oral health may be directly related to COVID-19 outcomes, as research shows that people with COVID-19 who have poor oral health tend to get sicker and are more likely to die.¹

In particular, we appreciate that this bill:

- **Adds oral health coverage to Medicare Part B directly.** Including oral health coverage in Part B ensures that people can get the care they need by treating the coverage of oral health services the very same way as other health services in the Medicare program. This approach ensures that dental coverage will be available to all Medicare enrollees who need it, not just those who can afford to pay out of pocket for care or additional premiums for additional insurance. It is also consistent with the growing recognition that oral health care should be more fully integrated into health care delivery, both in Medicare and more broadly in the health care system.
- **Offers sufficiently comprehensive oral health coverage.** This bill covers a robust set of dental and oral health services, as well as dental prostheses, and ensures that Medicare will reimburse for these services the same way it does for other health services. As we’ve seen in state Medicaid programs, inadequate oral health coverage is associated with negative health outcomes, reduced access to care, and lower provider participation rates.

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41415-020-1747-8>

- **Supports access to care for low-income Medicare enrollees.** This bill provides 100% Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) to ensure adequate reimbursement for dental providers who serve low-income enrollees. This measure, coupled with the fact that the bill aligns dental benefit cost-sharing with the rest of Medicare Part B, covering 100% of preventive services and 80% of other oral health services, will help support low-income enrollees to afford care and find providers.

The Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2021 serves as an important opportunity for Congress to take a major step to improve the oral health, overall health and well-being, and financial security of the very people and communities who have been most likely to get sick or lose their jobs during the pandemic. A direct extension of the Medicare Part B benefit to include oral health coverage would not only ensure that Medicare enrollees have affordable oral health care, but also would go a long way toward dismantling the disproportionate challenges that people of color, rural communities, veterans, older adults, people with disabilities, and people in nursing facilities and other congregate settings face in having the full range of their health needs met. Thank you for your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

The Medicare Oral Health Coalition

*The Medicare Oral Health Coalition is dedicated to ensuring that all Medicare enrollees have affordable, comprehensive oral health coverage as part of their overall health coverage. The coalition's formal members currently include **Families USA, AARP, National Rural Health Association, National Association of Community Health Centers, American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association, Justice in Aging, Center for Medicare Advocacy, The Arc of the United States, American Dental Hygienists' Association, National Council on Aging, Meals on Wheels, the DentaQuest Partnership, Community Catalyst, the Gerontological Society of America, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the Oral Health Progress and Equity Network (OPEN) Inc.** The views expressed by the Coalition do not necessarily represent those of individual members.*

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