

Senate Majority Policy Committee Hearing: Access to Rural Dental Care

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Department of Human Services

Senate Majority Policy Committee

Informational Hearing

June 18, 2025



Pennsylvania
Department of Human Services

Chairman Argall and members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee, thank you for inviting the Department of Human Services to submit testimony on access to dental care in rural communities. Good

oral health is critical to overall physical health and quality of life. The lack of dental care leads to poor oral health which negatively affects overall health. Therefore, DHS is committed to ensuring that Pennsylvania's Medicaid beneficiaries can receive quality dental care that is affordable and accessible.

The Department is dedicated to increasing access to pediatric and adult dental care for Medical Assistance (MA) beneficiaries in all areas of Pennsylvania. However, we recognize that access to this care is disproportionately challenging for our rural areas. The dental workforce shortage in our rural areas and designated dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) affects residents regardless of their participation in the MA program. While the priority of DHS is to address access to care for MA beneficiaries, we believe that the efforts to encourage provider participation in the network will impact the access to dental care for all residents of the rural communities of the Commonwealth.

As the Department seeks to continue to increase access to dental care, stakeholder engagement and partnerships will play an important role. To that end, DHS is engaged in a pilot project with the American Dental Association. Collaborating with the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Coalition for Oral Health, and the Pennsylvania Dental Association on this pilot project, the goal is to bring stakeholders together to craft a plan to increase access to dental care among Medicaid beneficiaries. Strategic initiatives of this project include outreach to dentists to encourage participation in Medicaid. In collaboration with five other states, this two-year project aims to identify best practices by studying their implementation to develop a blueprint for enhancing Medicaid provider participation and significantly increase dental service utilization for children and adults. Each state will execute an action plan using a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, subsequently sharing their results to collectively measure the efficacy of their strategic initiatives and inform the project's overall findings.

Another example of the Department's commitment to working with partners to address access to dental care is the involvement with the Department of Health's State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). The

State Health Improvement Plan is Pennsylvania's roadmap to improve health for all citizens. DHS is collaborating with the Department of Health on the SHIP, and regularly attends meetings held by the SHIP workgroup dedicated to finding ways to increase access to medical and oral health care. The objectives of this goal are to reduce the number of people who do not have a personal health care provider and to increase dentist visits.

Making sure that dentists have the tools and resources to continue their work in the Medicaid program is very important for DHS. Beginning on January 1, 2025, DHS implemented the increase to the managed care organization capitation rates mandated in Act 34 of 2023, which provided a uniform rate increase for certain dental procedures. DHS hopes the increased reimbursement rates will encourage more providers to participate and remain providers in the Medicaid program, which may improve access to dental care and related health issues affecting Medicaid beneficiaries.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to comment and share information about the DHS efforts to increase access to dental care across the Commonwealth and in rural areas of the state. This is an important topic, and we appreciate the committee's time and attention to this issue.