

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
HB 6 – Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Dental Coverage for Adults

House Health & Government Operations Committee
February 9, 2022



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 6, which would require Medicaid to provide full dental coverage to adults. At Health Care for the Homeless, we see the lifesaving benefits of oral health care every day. Despite progress that the State made in implementing an adult dental pilot program in Medicaid, dental care is largely uncovered by insurance is a huge barrier to overall health and health care for vulnerable individuals. But without adult dental coverage under Medicaid in Maryland, access to this lifesaving resource will remain out of reach for so many of the clients we serve. We strongly stand in full support of this bill.

Many clients we serve come to us with concerns about pain, with concerns about the inability to eat, and with concerns about the inability to feel confident enough to smile without teeth. It is unconscionable that the clients we serve are faced with the impossible choice of pain or homelessness. As one Health Care for the Homeless client, Pamela,¹ said “I’ll do whatever it takes,” the pain of her infected tooth consuming her entire body. Alone in her apartment in Dundalk, she began to pool her rent money to pay for an emergency dental procedure. “It was excruciating,” she said. “I couldn’t eat anything. Everything was painful.” Pamela was fortunate enough to be seen by Health Care for the Homeless dental staff, where we confirmed she had an infection. With the limited funds available to our non-profit Federally Qualified Health Center, Pamela had her tooth removed at no cost and received antibiotics to treat the infection. She paid her rent and is now pain free at home.

In another client’s story, after two decades of substance use and living on the streets, David² came to Health Care for the Homeless in 2009. Within months of seeing our care providers, he had a new heart defibrillator and engaged in regular therapy sessions. And in 2014, he secured housing. But it wasn’t until he received partial dentures in spring 2015 that he felt his life really started to change. “Dental care gave me my confidence back, and when you get your confidence back, you can move forward,” David said. “Everyone was surprised when they saw me for the first time with teeth. ‘Wow, you’re handsome,’ they said. It changes the way you think about yourself and present yourself to others.”

But there are hundreds of clients³ like Pamela and David in desperate need of relief. Dental care is expensive, and Maryland has no public insurance coverage for adults but for extremely limited circumstances. We have seen low-income adults go decades without addressing their oral health because they don’t have insurance and Medicaid won’t cover their care. And when they finally do see a dentist, it’s because the pain has become unbearable. **This is not a sustainable way to fund this most basic and essential form of health care.**

¹ Pseudonym used for confidentiality and privacy purposes.

² Pseudonym used for confidentiality and privacy purposes.

³ For more stories, see [Dental care gave David a chance against Cancer](#) and [When I laugh, it’s a big laugh](#).

There is a direct link between oral health and chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, as well as low birth weight for expectant mothers. The ability to chew and eat affects our overall health. Eating lots of vegetables and fruits isn't possible without teeth. The majority of the clients we see have varying stages of gum disease, with some exhibiting advanced decay. Maintaining clients' oral hygiene schedules is an effective way to prioritize care and help prevent more serious conditions from arising.

Additionally, oral health affects other significant aspects of a person's life. Our smiles are one of the first things others notice, and they affect our confidence and our speech, as with the case with David. For people experiencing homelessness, for example, it is vital to feel confident and speak clearly while looking for a job. A job could make the difference between gaining and losing housing.

Delivering quality care is a challenging work. Providing integrated, interdisciplinary care with a transient client population intensifies those routine challenges. Inadequate public health and housing benefits create and sustain homelessness while hampering our ability to scale services and limiting access to much needed specialty care. Comprehensive Medicaid benefits for essential health care is a critical component of ending homelessness. Though the dental pilot program made some progress, the scope of that pilot is extremely limited, as it is limited only to people enrolled in both Medicaid and Medicare (also known as "dual eligibles"). To give a sense of the scope, within the first year, we saw fewer than 10 clients who qualify (due in large part to the small number of Medicare recipients we see).

Ensuring a full adult dental benefit will power the transformative dental work happening at our clinics and throughout the state. Since we first started offering dental service, we have helped thousands of people with the luck and generosity of private entities and limited support from the state. But our goal is to ensure that 100% of our clients have access to dental care. We can only provide that care if Maryland Medicaid provides full adult dental care coverage.

Dental care is basic and essential health care. As such, it should be a full Medicaid benefit. We stand in strong support of HB 6 and we urge a favorable report on the bill.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.