

April 3, 2025

The Honorable Jamie Pederson
The Honorable John Braun
The Honorable Laurie Jenkins
The Honorable Drew Stokesbary

Sent via email

Dear Sens. Pederson and Braun, Speaker Jenkins and Rep. Stokesbary:

On behalf of the over 4,000 member dentists of the Washington State Dental Association (WSDA) and of the hundreds of thousands of patients we serve, I am writing to share our serious concerns and strong opposition to any reductions in Medicaid reimbursement rates for oral health care. As budget negotiations continue, we urge lawmakers to maintain the funding level included in the original budget passed by the House and Senate. This will help avert the devastating impacts on patients if this funding level is not maintained.

Patients rely on Medicaid for a wide variety of services, including preventive care, restorative care to fill cavities and fight dental caries, treating broken or abscessed teeth, endodontics, extractions, dentures, and both oral sedation and general anesthesia. While recognizing the difficult decisions the Legislature faces in balancing the state's operating budget, any reduction in dental Medicaid reimbursement rates will have devastating impacts for patient care both in the short term and be counterproductive – costing the state more money – in the long run.

Medicaid-covered patients range from children as young as one year old to neurodivergent, nonverbal or developmentally disabled adults. Many have additional physical disabilities or face other health challenges that make their oral health care more complicated. Safely and effectively treating this population takes extra training, specialized skills, and additional treatment time, making inadequate reimbursement rates an even larger barrier to care.

Thanks to investments by the Legislature, dental Medicaid reimbursement rates saw modest and long-overdue increases over recent budget cycles. But the rates remain roughly equivalent to those that were in place in 2008 (even ignoring the impacts of inflation over the past 17 years), and they are only 50-65 percent of the reimbursement rates of commercial dental benefit plans. Current rates already place serious financial pressures on the low-income patients who rely on Medicaid coverage. Worse yet, they can cause financially strapped patients to delay pursuing the care they need, which has serious long-term consequences.

Delays in care can lead to increased pain, poor sleep, and problems focusing at school or on the job. They can increase the risk of more serious decay and infection, result in speech and development issues, and create fear and anxiety regarding future dental care. Not only will this increase future dental treatment costs, but because good oral health is foundational for good overall health, it can also lead to broader health consequences.

The proposed cuts to dental Medicaid would be catastrophic for both the patients who depend on these funds and on the dental practices that work tirelessly to care for them. Many providers are already struggling to keep up with increased costs, severe labor shortages, and the lingering effects of COVID-19 on healthcare infrastructure. Additional reductions in reimbursement rates could force them to limit or drop Medicaid patients altogether, reducing access to care, worsening healthcare disparities, and further overwhelming already taxed emergency rooms, which are the most expensive venue in which to provide care. It will also adversely impact dental education in the state, as dental students gain valuable hands-on clinical experience treating Medicaid patients under the close supervision of their instructors. Losing these critically important opportunities to serve patients will have additional long-term access-to-care impacts in our state.

While these outcomes represent serious negative impacts on the long-term economic health of the state, an even more compelling case for avoiding dental Medicaid cuts was made by one of our central Washington members whose practice serves the Medicaid population almost exclusively:

"Every patient, every child, every family in my practice deserves access to quality dental care. Medicaid is about ensuring that all families, regardless of financial circumstances, have the opportunity for a healthy future."

WSDA, our members, and the patients we serve urge you to preserve this crucial resource and allow more Washingtonians to enjoy healthy, pain-free oral health. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Chris Dorow, DDS
President

CC: The Honorable Bob Ferguson, Governor
All Members, Washington State Legislature