

## Medicare Oral Health Coverage for Alabamians Would Improve Health, Reduce Health Care Costs

Medicare was established to keep many of our most vulnerable citizens healthy and reduce medical debt, but it leaves out a critical component of achieving these goals — oral health. Like a key to open a locked door, adding comprehensive oral health coverage to Medicare would enable seniors and people with disabilities to overcome many barriers to good oral health.

Medicare oral health coverage is a responsible investment. With coverage, about 952,000 seniors and people with disabilities who rely on Medicare in Alabama could afford the care that we all need to stay healthy, reducing related health care costs.<sup>1</sup>

### Oral Health Coverage is Essential to Alabamians' Health and Well-Being

- » Without oral health coverage, Alabamians are more likely to experience poor oral health, which is connected to higher risks for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, adverse mental health outcomes, and other conditions.
- » 18% of older adults in Alabama have lost all of their natural teeth due to oral disease, and thousands more have suffered from painful infections, limited ability to bite and chew, or chronic conditions that are made worse by oral disease.<sup>2</sup>
- » The number one barrier that prevents older adults from seeking dental care is the cost. Without oral health coverage, many cannot afford care that they need to stay healthy. 39% of older adults in Alabama have not seen a dentist in over a year.<sup>3</sup>

### Oral Health Coverage Can Produce Health Care Savings

- » Our country spends health care dollars on unnecessary emergency department use by patients without oral health coverage. In 2016, emergency dental visits cost the U.S. health system \$2.4 billion.<sup>4</sup> Many of these costs could easily be avoided if patients were able to afford timely, appropriate dental care in a more effective setting.
- » When lack of oral health coverage prevents people from getting care they need to be healthy, we all pay the price of increased costs to our health care system. Research shows that the average cost of treating patients with numerous chronic diseases is lower when they have preventive oral health coverage.<sup>5</sup>

### Oral Health Coverage Is Popular, and Voters Support Adding It to Medicare

- » 74% of adults age 65 and older want Medicare to include dental coverage. An August 2019 poll showed that 70% of likely voters across all age groups favored adding dental insurance to Medicare. Support is strong among voters in both political parties and in all regions of the country.<sup>6</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “Medicare Enrollment Dashboard,” Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. April 26, 2019. <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/CMSProgramStatistics/Dashboard.html>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Division of Oral Health, analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2016 data, “Oral Health Data by Topic: Adult,” Centers for Disease Control. November 26, 2017. <https://nccd.cdc.gov/oralhealthdata/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DOHDATA.ExploreByTopic&isYear=2016&isTopic=ADT&go=GO>.

<sup>3</sup> America’s Health Rankings analysis of CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, United Health Foundation. 2019. [https://www.americahealthrankings.org/explore/senior/measure/dental\\_visit\\_sr/state/ALL](https://www.americahealthrankings.org/explore/senior/measure/dental_visit_sr/state/ALL).

<sup>4</sup> American Dental Association Health Policy Institute analysis of 2016 Nationwide Emergency Department Sample data. 2018. Available from the American Dental Association upon request.

<sup>5</sup> “Analysis Shows Adults with Medicaid Preventive Dental Benefits Have Lower Medical Costs for Chronic Conditions.” November 23, 2017. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.nadp.org/PressReleases/2017/11/23/nadp-analysis-shows-adults-with-medicaid-preventive-dental-benefits-have-lower-medical-costs-for-chronic-conditions>.

<sup>6</sup> Poll of 1,000 likely voters conducted by YouGov for Families USA, August 2019; summarized by Patrick Willard, Adding dental coverage to Medicare is so popular it could sway voters in the Democratic primary. <https://familiesusa.org/product/families-usayougov-national-poll>.

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