



Medicare Oral Health Coverage: A Winning Issue

Millions of American families are in desperate need of affordable and comprehensive oral health coverage, particularly in communities that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit hardest. Older adults and people with disabilities, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color and/or living in rural communities, face drastic and growing health and economic disparities, and are most at risk of getting sick and losing jobs during the pandemic. These very communities would benefit most from Medicare coverage for their oral health needs. Yet, Medicare coverage currently excludes oral health, **leaving two thirds of the nation's more than 60 million Medicare enrollees without dental coverage or access to care.** This is an unconscionable oversight. We have a critical opportunity to address it in this moment in our country's history.

Oral health care is a key determinant of economic stability, continued employment opportunities, improved social connectedness, and overall health and wellness. By prioritizing Medicare oral health coverage in its platform, the Party has an opportunity to champion an issue that has broad voter support, invest in communities that the Party cares deeply about, and advance our nation's health and economic recovery. **It is time for us to act.**

The 2020 Party platform should include:

- The addition of oral health coverage to the Medicare program. This coverage should be comprehensive, affordable, and integrated into the existing Medicare structure to ensure that high quality, whole-patient health care is available to every Medicare enrollee.
- The inclusion of comprehensive, affordable oral health coverage for all Americans in the party's vision for broader, long-term health care reforms.

The American people want action on Medicare oral health coverage.

Americans believe that "access to health care should include access to dental care". In late 2019, a YouGov poll that found 80% of respondents, including 91% of Democrats and 67% of Republicans, supported this statement. Specifically, 70% of people favored or strongly favored including a dental benefit in Medicare. Respondents over 65 and Black respondents held the strongest support of any demographic group, and the majority voters of all ages, in all geographies, of all races, and of all political ideologies support this coverage.ⁱ As the Party shapes a platform with strong, broadly popular policy vision, Medicare oral health coverage is a significant and achievable priority.

Oral health coverage is a critical issue in communities that the Party is working to build specific policies around, including rural communities, older communities, and communities of color. Medicare coverage would go a long way to addressing the massive disparities that rural communities and communities of color currently face in accessing oral health care. For example, seven out of ten Black Medicare enrollees and six out of ten Hispanic enrollees did not see a dentist in the last year, compared to four out of ten white enrollees.ⁱⁱ Similarly, twenty percent of rural seniors have not seen a dentist or visited a dental clinic for more than 5 years, as compared to 14 percent of non-rural seniors.ⁱⁱⁱ Further,



older American Indian and Alaska Natives experience nearly three times the rate of untreated tooth decay than the older white population.^{iv}

At a time when the country is grappling with systemic racism in our society and health care systems, it is essential to prioritize policies that directly address inequities for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. Including Medicare oral health coverage in the platform would demonstrate a strong commitment to the health and economic security of key constituencies within the Party's big tent.

Oral health is key to both health and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Millions of older adults and people with disabilities are not able to afford the dental care they need in order to eat, socialize, work, regain employment, and stay healthy. Studies have repeatedly shown that poor oral health exacerbates social isolation, and that oral health care is a key component of managing dozens of chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.^v Yet, access to oral health care is declining and costs of oral health care are rising as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, putting care even further out of reach for the millions of Medicare enrollees who already struggle to afford it. Medicare oral health coverage would be a critical support to the older adults and people with disabilities, most especially people of color, who are disproportionately likely to suffer health and financial impacts as a result of the pandemic. This coverage is both a health *and* economic policy that would strengthen the Party's platform, demonstrating how the Party could pave the road to recovery from our current crises.

For all of these reasons it is clear that covering comprehensive, affordable oral health care in Medicare is a popular, needed, and wise investment in our nation's health and economic well-being. **Medicare oral health coverage is a win-win proposition for the Party and the country. We urge you to take this opportunity to demonstrate leadership on this essential issue at a time when the country needs it most.**

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. Current members 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, National Council on Aging, Meals on Wheels, DentaQuest Partnership, and Gerontological Society of America.

ⁱ Poll of likely voters conducted by YouGov, August 2019; https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/National_Banners.pdf

ⁱⁱ Burke, G. et al. "Adding A Dental Benefit to Medicare; Addressing Racial Disparities", Justice in Aging, October 2019. <https://www.justiceinaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Addressing-Oral-Health-Equity-by-Adding-a-Dental-Benefit-to-Medicare.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Burroughs, M. et al. "For Rural Seniors, Improving Oral Health Care Could Mean Better Health". December 2018. Families USA. https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/RuralSeniorOralHealth_120718_Fact-Sheet.pdf

^{iv} Phipps, K and Ricks, T. "The Oral Health of American Indian and Alaska Native Adult Dental Patients: Results of the 2015 IHS Oral Health Survey," Indian Health Service Data Brief. March 2016. https://www.ihs.gov/doh/documents/IHS_Data_Brief_March_2016_Oral_Health%20Survey_35_plus.pdf

^v Slavkin, H. (). "A national imperative: Oral health in Medicare". Journal of the American Dental Association, 148(5), 281–283. May 2017. [https://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177\(17\)30233-7/fulltext](https://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177(17)30233-7/fulltext)