



February 22, 2023

Marla Morse
Executive Director, Oral Health Ohio
Proponent Testimony, HB33
House Finance Subcommittee on Health & Human Services

Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health & Human Services, thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony supporting elements in HB33 related to oral health.

My name is Marla Morse, and I am the Executive Director of Oral Health Ohio, a statewide coalition of partners who advocate for and educate to improve the state's oral and overall health. Oral health is a critical, yet often overlooked part of overall health. From infancy to older adulthood, oral health affects a person's overall health and well-being. We look forward to a future where all Ohioans have optimal oral health, a vision that will be reached only when there is sufficient access to oral health care. Low Medicaid reimbursement rates are a barrier to dental care access and to achieving this vision. The proposed 15% increase in the Medicaid dental reimbursement rates in the SFY 2024-25 budget bill for the Ohio Department of Medicaid is a step in the right direction to achieving this vision.

First, a few data points that illustrate the current status and its implications. State funding of dental providers has been flat for many years, without a major increase for the last twenty years. Ohio ranks 42nd in child Medicaid dental reimbursement rates, lower than our neighboring states of Indiana, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Dentists cannot afford to provide care at the current reimbursement rate, which has resulted in "dental deserts" across our state. This is especially true for specialty providers, such as oral surgeons and pediatric dentists, and in rural parts of our state. According to a 2021 research brief by the American Dental Association, Health Policy Institute, 22.2% of Ohio adults, ages 18-64, and 47.7% of Ohio children ages 0-17, had Medicaid coverage. Yet, a 2017 analysis found that only 14% of Ohio dentists saw more than one hundred Medicaid patients over a year.

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The insufficient number of providers has many impacts:

- Only 40% of Ohio children aged 3 – 17 on Medicaid had a dental visit last year, compared to a nationwide figure of 74%.
- In 2019, 14.3% of Ohio adults had an unmet need for dental care. Adults living with a cognitive or developmental disability were more than twice as likely to have an unmet need for dental care.
- Increased use of hospital emergency departments for critical care, which is both more expensive and does not address the root cause of the dental condition.
- Inability to manage and control chronic diseases due to lack of access to preventive care.
- Oral disease, left untreated, impacts overall health and well-being, including attendance at school and employment.

How can we increase access and decrease the impacts on Ohioans' health? Studies have shown that increasing Medicaid dental fees closer to private insurance fee levels has a significant impact on dental care utilization and unmet dental needs among Medicaid-eligible children ("Association Between Medicaid Dental Payment Policies and Children's Dental Visits, Oral Health, and School Absences," JAMA Health Forum, Sept. 9, 2022).

Another factor that limits Medicaid recipients from accessing oral health care and is related to the "dental desert" mentioned above, is transportation, which has also been underfunded for many years. With fewer providers located in rural areas, patients frequently have to travel to another county to receive needed care. The rising cost of fuel over the last year continues unabated, has made medical transportation more expensive and less accessible to those who need it.

You can address these barriers to access by ensuring that the dental Medicaid budget is funded at a level that raises reimbursement rates closer to market rates and support a 20% increase for transportation, both of which will help reduce the barriers to access to oral health care and result in healthier Ohioans. Thank for your time today and I stand ready to answer any questions or be of further help.



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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marla Morse" with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Marla Morse
Executive Director