

State of Maine
130th Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Testimony of Beth Pearce, on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
April 26, 2021
Supporting:

**LD 996, An Act To Improve Dental Health Access for Maine Children
and Adults with Low Incomes**

Sponsored by Speaker Fecteau

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Beth Pearce, and I serve as Oral Health Coordinator at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA). MPCA is a membership organization that includes all of Maine's 20 Community Health Centers (CHCs).

Maine's Community Health Centers make up the largest primary care network in the state, providing comprehensive, high quality medical, behavioral, and dental care for more than 210,000 people each year or approximately 1 in 6 Mainers. CHCs are at the forefront of delivering care to rural and underserved Maine communities, and serve patients regardless of their health insurance status or ability to pay.

Maine Primary Care Association strongly supports LD 996 and thanks Speaker Fecteau and the other sponsors for bringing this extremely important and timely legislation forward.

Oral health care is one of the core services that Community Health Centers are required to offer, either on-site or through coordinated referrals. CHCs, often located in communities of need, serve as critical oral health access points for Maine people. Part of the health center model is to provide comprehensive care, of which dental services are a critical component to a patient's overall health. Simply put, we believe dental care is health care.

The lack of a comprehensive dental benefit in MaineCare leaves vulnerable adults to seek care in Emergency Departments (EDs) or not at all. For those who are able to find a dental practice that will treat adults with MaineCare, the care they receive is primarily episodic based on the issue at hand, and limited to the appropriate treatment needed to "*alleviate pain, infection or prevent imminent tooth loss,*"¹ as per the current MaineCare Dental Policy outlining criteria of covered services for adults. This is wholly inadequate as it treats the escalated problem rather than focusing on prevention and improved overall health of the individual.

By the time a patient is seen in a dental practice under these circumstances, their oral health conditions are often advanced and irreversible, which frequently leads to extensive procedures or extractions, neither of which are ideal. The loss of teeth can lead to many unintended consequences, such as poor nutrition or bone loss and can impact employability.

¹ [Chapter 101 of the Department of Health and Human Services \(Maine\)](#)

While it has been known for some time that a comprehensive dental benefit for adult MaineCare recipients would lead to diversion of care sought in an ED, as well as healthcare savings in this setting, there is much more at stake here. Comprehensive dental services with adequate prevention and periodontal (gum tissue) treatment are integral in the management of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and pregnancy.

To that end, MPCA has participated with the Health Policy Institute to conduct an economic evaluation that quantifies the healthcare savings that the Medicaid program would achieve by providing a full dental benefit, thus decreasing the healthcare costs for the above three key diagnoses.² For example, the total *medical care costs savings for these diagnoses are estimated to be \$1,997,273 in year two, and \$3,994,546 in year three*. These savings are *in addition* to the reduction of ED expenses that do not provide adequate treatment for the adults who seek care in that setting.

We believe it is clear that making an investment in primary and preventive oral health services would produce long-term savings from reduced hospitalizations and ED visits in the same way that investments in primary medical care have over time.

I would be remiss if I didn't also point out that on average, Maine's CHCs provide over \$2.6 million in uncompensated dental care to their patients each year; this is unsustainable. More to the point, consider how many more dentists and hygienists they could hire, and how many more patients they could serve, if they were able to get reimbursed through an adult dental benefit under the MaineCare Program.

On behalf of the patients, staff, and volunteers at Maine's Community Health Centers, we urge passage of LD 996.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this bill. If there is any additional information that MPCA or our members could provide, please do not hesitate to contact me at bpearce@mepca.org.

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² https://mainepcoh.org/publications/ADA_HPI_Estimating_the_Cost_of_MADB_in_Maine_FINAL.pdf