



Consumers for Affordable Health Care

Advocating the right to quality, affordable
health care for all Mainers.

P.O. Box 2490
Augusta, ME 04338
Telephone: 1-800-965-7476
Fax: 1-888-214-5233
www.mainecahc.org
consumerhealth@mainecahc.org

Testimony In Support Of: LD 1837, An Act to Increase Oral Health Services

May 12, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee On Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of LD 1837, An Act to Increase Oral Health Services.

My name is Kate Ende and I am the Policy Director at Consumers for Affordable Health Care, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advocates the right to quality, affordable health care for every person in Maine. As designated by Maine's Attorney General, CAHC serves as Maine's Health Insurance Consumer Assistance Program (CAP), which operates a toll-free HelpLine. Our HelpLine fields approximately 6,000 calls and emails every year from people across Maine who need help obtaining, keeping, using, or fixing problems with private health insurance or with accessing or affording health care services. CAHC also serves as the Ombudsman program for Maine's Medicaid program, MaineCare, and helps people apply for and navigate the enrollment process for MaineCare. It is with that background that we provide these comments.

LD 1837 makes several important changes needed to effectively implement and build on progress made in the 130th Legislature to improve access to oral health care for Mainers. Despite recent progress that has been made, including expanding Maine's School Oral Health Program and establishing a comprehensive adult dental benefit in MaineCare, many Mainers still lack access to the oral health and dental care they need. We hear from people through our HelpLine who can't find a dentist that will accept new patients or take their insurance. Those that manage to find a dental provider typically must wait several months, at least, and sometimes over a year, before they are able to get care. A recent survey of Maine voters found that more than half of Mainers are concerned about not being to find a dentist that accepts their insurance. This concern is even greater among people with MaineCare, with nearly three out of four MaineCare enrollees reporting that they are worried about not being able to find a dental provider that accepts their insurance.¹

This bill makes permanent two temporary oral health positions within the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) office of rural health and primary care. As this Committee is well aware, there is no silver bullet that can address all the dental access issues throughout Maine overnight, which is why it is important that there is capacity within the Maine CDC to lead on oral health issues on an ongoing basis, including workforce development,

¹ <https://www.mainecahc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Polling-Views-of-Maine-Voters-On-Health-Care-Affordability.pdf>

community education and engagement, data collection and analysis, research on oral health disparities, as well as securing federal funding for oral health initiatives in Maine.

This bill will also help facilitate the expansion of the Maine CDC School Oral Health Program and clarify the intent of the expansion of this program to apply to all **public** schools in Maine. The impacts of childhood tooth decay may not be easily reversed and have lifelong consequences on an individual's health and economic wellbeing.² It is unfortunate when children endure avoidable pain and suffering due to lack of preventive care - care that is demonstrably less invasive and more cost efficient. This is especially true for families with low income living in rural areas of the state. The School Oral Health Program helps fill a critical gap in our current dental system, by ensuring that kids can receive at least a screening and fluoride varnish, as well as follow up referrals as needed, which is why it is of the utmost importance that the expansion of this program is fully implemented to reach children in all of Maine's public schools.

This bill also requires the Department to work with the MaineCare Advisory Committee dental subcommittee to plan a pilot project for an oral health alternative payment model to reduce administrative burdens and help public health dental providers reach more children in school and childcare settings. In addition, this bill will enable this Committee to report out legislation based on findings and recommendations in the Department's annual report, which will allow for timely action to address any identified gaps or issues in the implementation of initiatives or in the provision of, or access to, services.

LD 1837 takes several important steps that will help to address oral health workforce shortages, increase access to dental care, and improve the oral health of Maine people. For these reasons, we urge you to support this bill. Thank you.

² Oral Health in Maine, Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, January 2013