

April 25, 2021

Testimony in Support of LD 996: An Act To Improve Dental Health Access for Maine Children and Adults with Low Incomes

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

I am writing today in support of LD 996. As a 2021 DMD candidate at the University of New England College of Dental Medicine in Portland, I have seen firsthand what happens to adults who lack regular dental care. Patients must wait until they are in pain and seek emergency treatment, often extractions, and those who have Medicaid may or may not be able to seek routine and preventative care. The UNE CDM Oral Health Center accepts Medicaid, however, coverage for adults is limited to addressing pain and only treatments that prevent “imminent tooth loss.”

Patients who seek emergency treatment are encouraged to become established patients at the OHC. However, Medicaid will not pay for a new patient exam and radiographs, which is a barrier for people who want dental care, but cannot afford to pay \$140 at the OHC, fees which are much lower than those at private practices. This encourages patients to only seek emergency care, because Medicaid will pay for problem-focused exams and tooth extractions.

On rotation at a federally qualified health center in rural Maine, I did extractions almost daily for Mainers with and without Medicaid who were in pain and many of whom had multiple missing teeth due to dental disease. This problem will continue to get worse if those who are the most in need cannot get routine care covered through their Medicaid benefits. It is also a generational problem in Maine as children learn from their parents that tooth loss is part of a “normal” aging process and dental care is out of reach financially.

I worked unsuccessfully with edentulous patients to get coverage for dentures through Medicaid. Patients’ health care providers, including the PCP, dentist and a psychiatrist, must prove the removable dental prosthesis is “medically necessary,” which is typically only in the cases of documented significant weight loss due to lack of dentures or severe mental health diagnoses.

Many of our elderly patients seeking care at the OHC have systemic conditions like diabetes and hypertension. These health issues are compounded by a poor diet if the patient does not have the ability to masticate nutritious foods like vegetables, fruits and lean protein. Studies have shown a correlation between chronic diseases like diabetes and periodontal disease, according to NIH. Periodontal disease is the number one cause of tooth loss in adults.

Comprehensive care is key to improving the oral health of all Maine people. Preventive, diagnostic and restorative dental services are necessary for maintaining good oral health and systemic health. Maine has dental students and dentists providing quality, comprehensive dental care at UNE and the state’s federally qualified health centers, and now is the time to ensure adults in need can access that care, not only to improve their oral health but their children’s oral health and for all generations of Mainers to come.

Thank you,
Robyn B. Rousseau

DMD Candidate 2021
University of New England
College of Dental Medicine

Robyn Rousseau
Kennebunkport

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