



# Consumers for Affordable Health Care

Advocating the right to quality, affordable, health care  
for every person in Maine.

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Testimony in Support:  
LD 1501, An Act To Protect Oral Health for Children in Maine  
April 26, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments in support of LD 1501, An Act To Improve Oral Health for Children in Maine.

I am Ann Woloson, Executive Director at Consumers for Affordable Health Care, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with the mission to improve access to quality and affordable health care for every person in Maine.

Consumers for Affordable Health Care serves as Maine's Health Insurance Consumer Assistance Program and operates a statewide, toll-free Consumer Assistance HelpLine that that anyone in Maine can call when they have questions about health coverage options, enrolling in and using health coverage. This service includes responding to questions related to MaineCare, as well as free and sliding-scale safety net programs including dental programs.

The vast majority of consumers who call our HelpLine get the answers they need, are pointed toward resources they were unaware of, or are able to work with us to resolve their specific problem. However, families with children who have dental needs who are covered by MaineCare face particular challenges in obtaining care. These challenges drive our support to improve access to oral health care in Maine.

Access to preventive oral health care is important to everyone but is critical for children. Children who do not receive preventive dental care are more likely to experience tooth decay, which can result in impaired speech development, difficulties with socialization, and lower performance in school. The impacts of childhood tooth decay may not be easily erased and have lifelong consequences on an individual's health and economic wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, preventive oral and dental care improves health and economic outcomes for individuals. It is also in the State's fiscal interest to invest in preventive care to prevent more costly interventions later. Data from hospitals across Maine show that emergency department visits resulting from dental needs have been on the rise. A report by DHHS and Maine Health Access Foundation found that "the top diagnostic reason for visits to the [emergency department] among MaineCare enrollees and the uninsured among young adults ages 15-24 [. . . was dental disease] in 2010."<sup>2</sup> In 2007 alone, there were 32,969 visits to emergency departments that were "due to preventable dental conditions."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [ihffps://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/population-health/odh/documents/oral-health-in-Maine-2013.pdf](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/population-health/odh/documents/oral-health-in-Maine-2013.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> <https://muskie.usm.maine.edu/Publications/PHHP/Maine-Emergency-Department-Use.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Oral Health in Maine, January 2013. Augusta, ME: Oral Health Program, Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013. [https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/population-health/odh/documents/oral-health-in-Maine2\(1\)13.pdf](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/population-health/odh/documents/oral-health-in-Maine2(1)13.pdf).

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. Although MaineCare covers comprehensive dental benefits for eligible children, including preventive care, children often lack meaningful access to services. We have heard from parents who call our HelpLine because they cannot find a dentist who will treat their child. We have seen firsthand how the lack of dental providers, and more specifically dental providers who accept MaineCare, has contributed to access issues for children who need services. This is especially true for families with low income living in rural areas of the state.

It is a terrible waste of resources to allow dental disease to impair any child's oral health and then unnecessarily have to pay for costly emergency dental care. Providing preventive dental care in schools could help to address this problem by making dental care more affordable and accessible for families. It will also benefit the State. First, when delivery of preventive care can be incorporated into existing access points, such as schools, it helps to increase utilization. Second, the availability of school-based care will alleviate the burden on individuals to find dental providers who accept their insurance and on students to have to travel, sometimes far distances, for dental appointments during the school day. Third, delivering preventive services through schools will make dental care more affordable for families by reducing the impact of dental disease through earlier intervention, a far less costly approach than waiting until a disease has progressed and more extensive treatment is needed.

For example, in 2019, the National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center published its fourth edition of a resource guide providing information about state initiatives aimed at improving child access to oral health care and links to state specific information and evaluations of such initiatives.<sup>4</sup> It cites the CDC's Community Preventive Services Task Force recommendation for the use of school-based dental sealant programs and includes the rationale for that recommendation, which is based on evidence that shows:

- these programs increase the number of children who receive sealants (at school), and
- that dental sealants result in a large reduction in tooth decay among school-aged children (5 to 16 years of age), and
- that the economic evidence indicates the benefits of school sealant programs are greater than their costs when implemented in schools that have a large number of students at high risk for caries.<sup>5</sup>

Ensuring adequate access to oral health care is a complex problem, which is why a stronger oral health infrastructure is needed in Maine to oversee initiatives, coordinate efforts and evaluate programs on a statewide level. LD 1501 will provide a much-needed investment that will strengthen Maine's oral health infrastructure and increase access to services for Maine children. For these reasons, we strongly urge members of the Committee to support LD 1501.

Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> Barzel R, Holt K, eds. 2019. Promoting Oral Health in Schools: A Resource Guide (4th ed.). Washington, DC: National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center. Promoting Oral Health in Schools: A Resource Guide (4th ed.) © 2019 by National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center, Georgetown University

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.thecommunityguide.org/sites/default/files/assets/Oral-Health-Caries-School-based-Sealants\\_0.pdf](https://www.thecommunityguide.org/sites/default/files/assets/Oral-Health-Caries-School-based-Sealants_0.pdf)