



NORTH CAROLINA
DENTAL SOCIETY®

Advocacy Toolkit



Addressing North Carolina's Oral Health Crisis

ncdental.org

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Addressing North Carolina's Oral Health Crisis



Issue Overview

A Crisis in Access to Care

Access to routine oral health care is essential for overall health and well-being; however, many families in North Carolina struggle to access this critical care. As it stands, there are more Medicaid recipients in our state than ever before, but the current system does not provide enough reimbursement to ensure enough dentists can service them.

Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care in North Carolina are at the same levels that they were nearly 20 years ago. Low reimbursement rates, coupled with macroeconomic trends – such as rising student loan debt, higher wage demands, and soaring overhead costs – have made it nearly impossible for dentists to treat these patients.

With the addition of more than 600,000 new Medicaid patients in the recent expansion, more patients have coverage for this critical care, but less access to a routine provider.

Increased Medicaid Reimbursement Is the Solution

Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care would result in more providers treating more Medicaid patients. Dentists want to service these patients. In fact, a 2024 survey of North Carolina Dental Society member dentists found low reimbursement rates to be the biggest challenge to treating Medicaid patients. And, if reimbursement rates were raised to better reflect market rates, members would be overwhelmingly likely to treat Medicaid patients.

Increased Medicaid Reimbursement Rates Lead to More Access to Care

Dentists want to treat Medicaid patients, but the current system makes it challenging for them to do so. Young dentists are entering the profession with high student loan debt and are saddled with rising materials costs, a dental hygienist shortage, higher wage demands, and rising overhead. This disincentivizes new dentists from serving Medicaid patients, even though they desire to do so. Because reimbursement rates are so low, they are unable to recoup the costs of care for these patients and, therefore lose significant revenue for each Medicaid patient they see.

Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care will allow dentists in North Carolina to treat more Medicaid patients, thereby reducing the care gap and creating greater access to care for those who need it most.

Increased Medicaid Reimbursement Rates Lead to Reduced Overall Costs for the State

Medicaid patients who lack routine dental care can end up in emergency rooms or ambulatory surgical centers (ASCs) for preventable conditions, which are more expensive and can lead to missed work or school. Visits to the emergency room for dental pain can range from \$400 to \$1,500, compared with \$90 to \$200 for a visit to the dentist. The most extreme cases of untreated dental infections cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospitalization, and some end in tragic, yet preventable deaths ([American Dental Association](#)). The high costs associated with emergency room visits or invasive procedures conducted in ASCs can ultimately cost the state more money than increasing access to routine care.

By increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care to ensure all North Carolinians have access to a routine provider, we will lessen the need for expensive emergency room visits and high-cost referrals to ASCs, saving the state money in the long term.

House Bill 60 – An Act To Modernize Medicaid Dental Rates

If passed, North Carolina House Bill 60 would raise Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care by 30%, bringing North Carolina more in line with our surrounding southern states. Passing H.B. 60 is a critical step in improving access to dental care for North Carolinians, therefore improving overall health and reducing overall costs for the state.

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Talking Points & Messaging Guidance

The below messaging and talking points were developed to support communications efforts in favor of increased Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care.

Sound Bite

North Carolina must ensure access to critical dental care for patients by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates, therefore improving overall health and reducing costs for the state.

Elevator Speech

Oral health is essential for overall health and well-being. In fact, poor oral health is associated with other chronic conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes, and can cause pain and infections that negatively impact quality of life. While we know routine dental care is vital, it is incredibly challenging for North Carolina's most vulnerable to access. Our current Medicaid provider network cannot keep up with demand, because the cost of treatment has risen too far beyond the current rates of reimbursement.

Rising costs and dental team wage demands have made running a dental practice more expensive than ever, while Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care are at the same levels that they were nearly 20 years ago. Dental practices in North Carolina have historically taken a loss to treat Medicaid recipients, but they can no longer afford to do so. At the same time, the Medicaid-eligible population in our state has increased, meaning more North Carolinians have coverage, but less access to a provider. Increased Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care will ensure all North Carolinians have access to a routine provider, decreasing the need for expensive emergency room visits and high-cost referrals to ambulatory surgical centers.

Talking Points

Access to dental care is essential for North Carolinians' overall health and well-being.

- Poor oral health is associated with other chronic conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes.
- Oral disease can cause pain and infections that negatively impact a person's daily life, leading to lower academic achievement for youth and lower economic and social advancement for adults.

Because of rising costs and inadequate reimbursement, dental practices in North Carolina can no longer afford to treat Medicaid patients.

- Young dentists are entering the profession with higher student loan debt than their predecessors.
- Rising materials costs have made it more expensive to provide treatment.
- A shortage of dental hygienists has led to higher dental team wage demands, making it more expensive to staff a dental practice.
- All of this while Medicaid reimbursement rates are at the same level as nearly 20 years ago.
- Dental practices have historically taken a loss to treat Medicaid patients; they can no longer afford to do so.

With Medicaid expansion, more North Carolinians have coverage, but less access to a routine provider.

- In December 2023, more than 600,000 additional North Carolinians became eligible to enroll in Medicaid including many in rural communities.
- Enrollment was successful – within one year of implementation, nearly 600,000 enrolled.
- However, despite the availability of coverage, Medicaid patients have less access to a routine provider.

Ensuring all North Carolinians have access to dental care can lead to lower overall costs for the state.

- Emergency room (ER) visits and referrals to ambulatory surgical centers (ASCs) for non-traumatic dental conditions (NTDCs) are costly for the state, and Medicaid patients who lack routine dental care can end up in ERs or ASCs for preventable conditions.
- These can ultimately cost the state more money than increasing access to routine care, due to the high costs associated with ER visits or invasive procedures conducted in ASCs.
- Fewer dental problems mean fewer dental visits, and therefore, less time away from school or work.

North Carolina is behind our fellow southern states.

- North Carolina ranks in the bottom third of the nation's Medicaid programs when it comes to reimbursement as a percentage of private insurance payments for child services. ([American Dental Association \(ADA\) Health Policy Institute, 2024](#))
- For child dental services, the Medicaid fee-for-service reimbursement as a percentage of an average dentist's charges (UCR) in North Carolina is 34.3%, nearly 13% lower than South Carolina, 12% lower than Virginia, and 9% lower than Tennessee.
- Virginia increased its Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care across the board by 30% in 2022, and in fall 2024, reported a nearly 20% increase in the Medicaid provider network. ([DentaQuest](#))

Passing North Carolina House Bill 60 is a critical step in improving access to oral health care.

- If passed, North Carolina House Bill 60, "An Act to Modernize Medicaid Dental Rates," would increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care by 30%.
- This increase would bring North Carolina more in line with our surrounding southern states.
- Passing H.B. 60 is a critical step in improving access to dental care for North Carolinians and would improve overall health and reduce overall costs for the state.



Proof Points

- Some 100 million Americans fail to see a dentist each year, even though regular dental examinations and good oral hygiene can prevent most dental disease. ([ADA](#))
- Every year in the United States, there are an estimated 2 million visits to hospital emergency rooms for dental pain. ([ADA](#))
- ER visits for dental health care cost three times as much as a visit to the dentist, averaging \$749 if the patient isn't hospitalized, amounting to \$1.6 billion annually (one-third of which is paid by Medicaid). ([ADA](#))
- In 2009, abscesses and cavities – both largely preventable conditions – accounted for nearly 80% of dental-related ER visits, according to the Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project. ([ADA](#))
- Studies show that uninsured and Medicaid patients seek dental care in ERs more frequently than those with insurance. ([ADA](#))
- Visits to the ER for dental pain can cost from \$400 to \$1,500, compared with \$90 to \$200 for a visit to the dentist. The most extreme cases of untreated dental infections cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospitalization, and some end in tragic, yet preventable deaths. ([ADA](#))
- On average, 34 million school hours are lost each year, because of unplanned (emergency) dental care, and more than \$45 billion in U.S. productivity is lost each year due to untreated dental disease. ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#))
- Virginia increased its Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care by 30% in 2022, and in fall 2024, reported a nearly 20% increase in the Medicaid provider network. ([DentaQuest](#))
- In 2022, the average debt per dental school graduate was \$293,900, and 83% of dental students graduated with educational debt. ([American Student Dental Association](#))

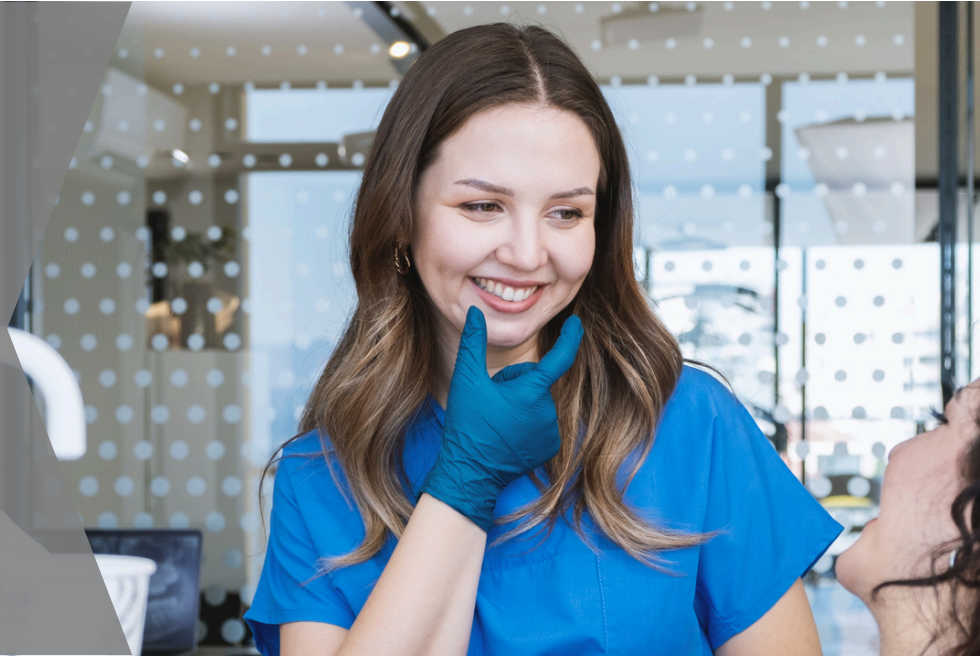
The Issue In North Carolina

- In 2019, 1.8 million ER visits were for non-traumatic dental conditions (NTDCs), costing the state \$3.4 billion, or about \$1,887 per visit. ([Journal of the ADA](#))
- The top NTDCs from 2019 to 2021 (decay, toothache, and infection) could likely have been prevented with dental exams. ([Journal of the ADA](#))
- Between 2010 and 2020, ER visits in rural settings were more likely to be NTDCs, compared to those in urban areas. ([Journal of the ADA](#))
- North Carolina ranks in the bottom third of the nation's Medicaid programs when it comes to reimbursement as a percentage of private insurance payments for child dental services. ([ADA Health Policy Institute, 2024](#))
- Low rates of reimbursement is the top reason dentists in North Carolina don't treat Medicaid patients. ([North Carolina Dental Society Member Survey, January 2024](#))
- NCDS members would be overwhelmingly likely to treat Medicaid patients if reimbursement rates would be raised to better reflect market rates. ([North Carolina Dental Society Member Survey, January 2024](#))





Addressing North Carolina's Oral Health Crisis



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: Why is dental care important for overall health?

A: Dental care is an essential component of overall health and well-being. Your mouth is a window into the health of your body. Poor dental care is associated with other chronic conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes. Importantly, oral disease can cause pain and infections that negatively impact eating and speaking and can impact social interactions, academic achievement, and job potential.

Q: What are the prohibitive factors for Medicaid patients seeking dental care?

A: The State of North Carolina covers 53,819 square miles. Imagine you need to travel at least 60 miles just to reach your nearest Medicaid dental provider. This is a reality for many North Carolinians. Medicaid recipients must travel around the state to access providers, and those without means for transportation or flexible work schedules may be unable to receive care entirely. This leaves many North Carolinians without routine dental care, which can result in more serious dental and oral care issues.

Q: What changes to the dental profession have made this increase necessary?

A: Our current Medicaid provider network cannot keep up with demand, because the cost of treatment has risen too far beyond the current rates of reimbursement, leaving this critical care inaccessible to those who need it most. Young dentists are entering the profession with high student loan debt and are saddled with rising materials costs, a dental hygienist shortage, higher wage demands, and rising overhead. This disincentivizes new dentists from serving Medicaid patients, even though many desire to do so. Because reimbursement rates are so low, they are unable to recoup the costs of care for these patients, and therefore, lose significant revenue for each Medicaid patient they see.

Q: Are there enough dentists in North Carolina to treat the existing pool of Medicaid recipients?

A: With more than 6,300 licensed and active dentists across the state, and three dental schools that serve Medicaid patients, there are enough dentists in North Carolina to treat the existing pool of Medicaid recipients. However, low reimbursement rates prohibit dentists from providing services to Medicaid recipients, as dentists are unable to recoup the high cost of providing care.

Q: How can we be assured this will result in more dentists treating Medicaid patients?

A: Dentists in North Carolina want to treat Medicaid patients, but the current system makes it incredibly challenging to do so. Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care would result in more providers treating more Medicaid patients. In fact, the Commonwealth of Virginia expanded its dental benefits in 2022 and saw a nearly 20% increase in dental provider participation.

Q: How does North Carolina compare to our surrounding southern states?

A: North Carolina ranks in the bottom third of the nation's Medicaid programs when it comes to reimbursement as a percentage of private insurance payments for child services. For child dental services, the Medicaid fee-for-service reimbursement as a percentage of average dentist's charges (UCR) in North Carolina is 34.3%, nearly 13% lower than South Carolina, 12% lower than Virginia, and 9% lower than Tennessee.

Q: How does dental care impact emergency room costs?

A: According to the ADA, ER visits for dental health care can cost three times as much as a visit to the dentist. In North Carolina, it costs an average of \$1,589 for emergency room treatment. Increasing reimbursement rates for Medicaid services will allow dentists to treat more patients through preventive care, thus decreasing the need for expensive ER visits and high-cost referrals to ambulatory surgical centers. This would reduce the burden on already crowded ERs and reduce the need for missed work or school.


Q: How many children in North Carolina are at risk of not being able to access dental care?

A: According to the [Urban Institute](#), as of July 2024, about 1.3 million children in North Carolina are enrolled in Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program. Each of these children is at risk of no longer accessing quality dental care services and treatment, if dentists are unable to afford to continue serving Medicaid recipients.

Q: Is there legislation to support improved access to care?

A: Yes! North Carolina House Bill 60, "An Act to Modernize Medicaid Dental Rates," would increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care by 30%, bringing North Carolina more in line with our surrounding southern states. Passing this legislation is a critical step in improving access to dental care for North Carolinians, therefore improving overall health and reducing overall costs for the state.





Addressing North Carolina's Oral Health Crisis

Legislator Outreach Guidance

It is critical lawmakers in North Carolina understand the need for swift action to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care and improve access to critical oral health care. Outlined below are instructions for identifying and contacting your representatives in the North Carolina General Assembly. The templates are meant to serve as guides and should be tailored to tell your story and why you support increased Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care.

How to Contact Your Legislator:

1. Identify your North Carolina House member or senator by entering your home address at: ncleg.gov/FindYourLegislators.
2. Click on the highlighted name of your representative for "NC House" or "NC Senate."
3. Email and mailing addresses are listed on the members' biography page.
4. Copy and paste the message below to email OR print and address to the listed mailing address.
5. If you are sending via email, please also copy the "legislative assistant." Email addresses for legislative assistants are listed on the members' biography page.
6. If you wish to call your representative or senator directly, phone numbers are also listed on the biography page.

Subject Line Ideas:

- Calling on You to Support H.B. 60: Modernize Medicaid Dental Rates & Improve Access to Care
- Legislative Action Needed: Support H.B. 60 & Improve Access to Dental Care

Email/Letter Template:

Dear [INSERT LEGISLATOR'S NAME]:

I am writing to urge you to support House Bill 60, a bill to modernize Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care, improving access to dental care, and lowering overall costs for the state.

Access to routine oral health care is essential for overall health and well-being; however, many families in North Carolina struggle to access this critical care. As it stands, there are more Medicaid recipients in our state than ever before, but the current system does not provide enough reimbursement to ensure enough dentists can service them.

Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care are at the same levels that they were nearly 20 years ago. Low reimbursement rates, coupled with macroeconomic trends – such as rising student loan debt, higher wage demands, and soaring overhead costs – have made it nearly impossible for dentists to treat these patients.

Oral health care is essential. In fact, poor oral health is associated with other chronic conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes, and can cause pain and infections that negatively impact quality of life. In 2019, 1.8 million ER visits were for non-traumatic dental conditions, costing the state \$3.4 billion, or about \$1,887 per visit. For uninsured or Medicaid patients, **these ER visits cost the state three times as much on average as a visit to the dentist.**

Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care has worked for our fellow southern states. Virginia increased its Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care across the board by 30% in 2022, and in fall 2024, reported a nearly 20% increase in the Medicaid provider network.

Thank you for considering this important issue.

Sincerely,

[INSERT YOUR NAME]

[INSERT HOME ADDRESS]

Phone Call Script:

Hello [INSERT LEGISLATOR'S NAME]:

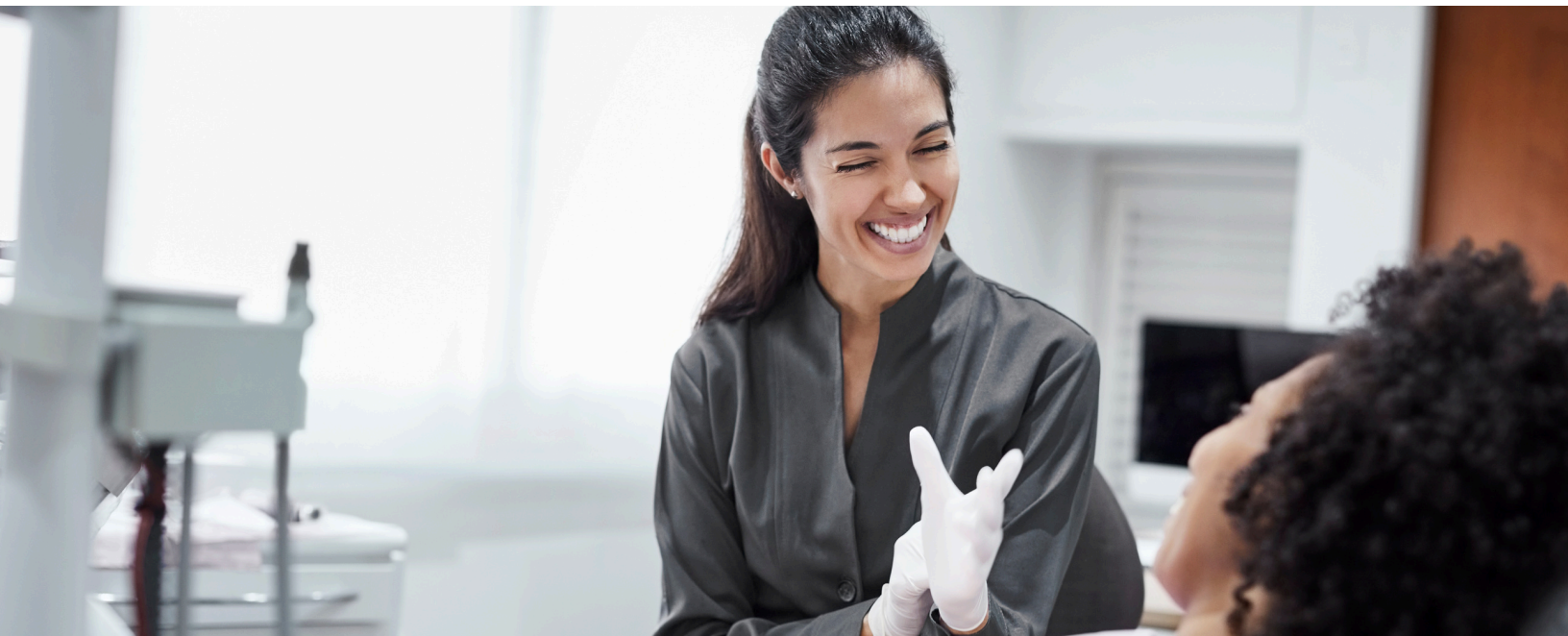
My name is [INSERT YOUR NAME], and I am calling to ask for your support of H.B. 60, a bill that would increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services and improve access to this critical care for North Carolinians who need it most.

Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care in North Carolina are at the same levels that they were nearly 20 years ago, while our surrounding southern states have made increases. Combined with rising overhead costs and higher wage demands for staff, dental practices in North Carolina can no longer afford to treat Medicaid patients. At the same time, the Medicaid-eligible population in the state has increased, meaning more North Carolinians have coverage, but less access to a provider.

I urge you to address this important issue by supporting House Bill 60, a bill to modernize and raise Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care.

This bill will ensure all North Carolinians have access to a routine dental provider, decreasing the need for expensive emergency room visits and high-cost referrals to ambulatory surgical centers.

Thank you for your consideration.



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Social Media Templates

The social media posts below are examples and can be used to generate conversation online. We encourage you to tailor these social media posts to your voice.

Social Media Posts (Access to Care):

LinkedIn or Facebook

Did you know North Carolina ranks in the bottom third of states for Medicaid reimbursement rates for children's dental care?

Access to oral health care is essential, but many families in North Carolina struggle to access this critical care, because low Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care make it so dentists can't afford to treat them.

Raising Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care means more access to care, better health outcomes, and lower long-term costs.

Ask your legislator to support #HB60, a bill to modernize Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care. Our communities deserve it. #HealthcareAccess #Medicaid #DentalCare #HB60

X or Threads

N.C. ranks in the bottom 1/3 in the U.S. for #Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care, where many families struggle to access critical oral health care. #HB60 could change that.

N.C. must raise rates to expand access, improve health, and lower costs for our state. #DentalCare

Social Media Posts (Reduced Costs for the State):**LinkedIn or Facebook**

Medicaid patients, who lack routine dental care, can end up in emergency rooms for preventable conditions, which are more expensive and can lead to missed work or school. These visits can range from \$400 to \$1,500, compared with \$90 to \$200 for a visit to the dentist, ultimately costing the state more money than increasing access to routine care.

By increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care, and therefore, ensuring all North Carolinians have access to a routine provider, we will lessen the need for expensive ER visits and high-cost referrals to ambulatory surgical centers, saving the state money in the long term.

Ask your legislator to support #HB60, a bill to modernize Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care and address this issue. #Medicaid #DentalCare #HealthcareAccess #HB60

X or Threads

Medicaid patients who lack routine dental care can end up in the ER for preventable conditions, which are more expensive for N.C. Ask your legislator to support #HB60, to modernize Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care and save the state money. #Medicaid #DentalCare #HB60