

Addressing Oral Health Inequities During COVID-19 and Beyond

While we do not yet know the extent to which COVID-19 will exacerbate longstanding inequities in our oral health care system, it is certain that once this acute public health crisis abates, our nation's oral health crisis will remain. In this unique moment, we have the opportunity to transform a system that has historically left many without access to the oral health care they deserve. Now, more than ever, we need to invest in innovative ways of delivering care and ensuring that no community of people is left behind.

The full policy brief explores several near and long-term policy options to respond to oral health care needs during this crisis and to carry us forward toward a more equitable oral health care system. Here is a sampling of the recommendations.

Strive for universal and comprehensive dental coverage

For now: Increase Medicaid funding and protect dental benefits – COVID-19 has strained state budgets and without an additional infusion of federal dollars, state Medicaid programs will struggle to meet increased demand. Unfortunately, this could mean cuts to dental coverage for populations that already face significant barriers to care. Advocates should continue to push for increasing the Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP), including discrete increases for dental services. In addition, advocates should be prepared to defend against state-level reductions in Medicaid dental benefits which will lead to greater oral health problems in the future and may cost states more in the long-run.

For the future: Secure universal dental coverage – Even if current levels of coverage are maintained, millions of people will continue to go without access to oral health care. Currently, only two-thirds of state Medicaid programs provide dental coverage beyond emergency services, while Medicare Part B does not include dental coverage. Advocates should build upon recent efforts to seek comprehensive dental benefits as part of any proposal to expand access to health care.

Improve access to and increase payment for teledentistry services

For now: Eliminate restrictions on teledentistry – While the concept is not new, the physical distancing requirements necessitated by COVID-19 underscore the importance of access to telehealth and teledentistry services. Advocates should urge State Medicaid programs and licensing boards to authorize coverage of tele-dentistry services by all qualified oral health providers. This would allow more people to get evaluations and even some preventive and routine care even while direct contact visits with providers are not possible.

For the future: Sustain and expand the use of teledentistry to increase access – Even after the COVID-19 pandemic has waned, expansion of teledentistry models, especially when paired with an expanded oral health care team, can extend the reach of the delivery system and help more people get access to timely care. Advocates should track immediate policy changes that have facilitated the expansion of telehealth and teledentistry services and urge policymakers to make such policies permanent.



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Expand the dental workforce

For now: Utilize the full dental team at the top of their scope – In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dental delivery system will need more providers to meet the increased demand for care and to ensure people can use their coverage. Expanding hygienists' scope of practice and allowing for the use of dental therapists is a cost-effective way to allow clinics to serve more patients and allow communities to be served by locally-based providers. Advocates should urge state agencies to relax restrictions on scope of practice for providers who are best positioned to meet patients where they are.

For the future: Authorize dental therapists across the country and maintain expanded scope for the full team – Paired with comprehensive dental coverage and the ability to practice via teledentistry, an expanded dental workforce will help create a future where everyone can access the dental care they need, when and where they need it. Advocates should continue to push for authorization of dental therapists and other oral health workforce models aimed at ensuring equitable access to care.

Read the [full brief](#) for additional information and examples of implementation of the policy options outlined above.