Improving Access to Dental Care in Rural America: Policy Levers Available to State Legislatures

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Who we are...

South Carolina Rural Health Research Center

- 1 of 7 Rural Health Research Centers funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration
- Administratively located in the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina
- Mission: to increase knowledge of the persistent inequities in health status among populations of the rural US, with an emphasis on factors related to socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and access to healthcare services.
Presentation Objectives

- Describe why oral health is important to overall health *(and the health of your state Medicaid’s budget 😊)*
- Describe the shortages of dentists in rural America
- Describe the policy levers available to state legislatures to address dental workforce shortages:
  - Practice act modifications
  - Medicaid reimbursement policies & administrative bureaucracy
  - Recruitment & retention programs

Why Oral Health Matters?

Oral health disparities hurt everyone!

Martin, AB et al. Dental Health Access to Care Among Rural Children, 2008, included in CD, also available at [http://rhr.sph.sc.edu/report/7-2\%20Dental\%20Health\%20and\%20Access\%20to\%20Care\%20Among\%20Rural\%20Children.pdf](http://rhr.sph.sc.edu/report/7-2%20Dental%20Health%20and%20Access%20to%20Care%20Among%20Rural%20Children.pdf)

What are costly diagnoses to your states’ Medicaid programs?

- Those who come early… *Preemies*
  

- Those who live long… *Dementia/Alzheimer’s*
  

- Those who with chronic disease… *Diabetes & Cardiovascular Disease*
  
Policy Lever 1: Expansion of Professional Practice Acts

- Alternative dental hygiene models (e.g. dental hygiene therapists)
- Safety net practice/supervision for dental hygienists*
- Non-direct supervision models for dental auxiliaries for preventive services*


Policy Lever 2:

- Medicaid reimbursement & bureaucracy
  - Competitive dental reimbursement rates
  - Easy to navigate provider enrollment & billing infrastructure
  - Non-dental clinician reimbursement policy for preventive services, e.g. fluoride varnish*
    - Special considerations for safety net providers such as community health centers and rural health clinics

Policy Lever 3: Recruitment & Retention Programs

- National Health Service Corp
  - Encourage FQHC dental expansions & site eligibility
  - Support outreach & education of students
  - Connect with State Offices of Rural Health, Primary Care Offices, & Primary Care Associations, State Divisions of Oral Health
- State-supported loan repayment programs & other incentive packages

National Private Sector Oral Health Workforce & Public Health Resources
Summary

- Lack of access to dental care is pervasive in rural America
- State legislatures have some policy levers available to them to solve the problem
- Practice act expansions, Medicaid reimbursement & administrative policies, and recruitment and retention programs are available to state legislatures to improve access but each has significant political pros and cons with varying degrees of impact.

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