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## HB 6

### Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Dental Coverage for Adults Hearing of the House Health & Government Operations Committee

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1:30 PM

## SUPPORT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a not-for-profit civil rights and anti-poverty legal services organization which seeks to advance social justice, economic and racial equity, and fundamental human rights in Maryland. Our Health Rights Project supports policies and practices that promote the overall health of Marylanders struggling to make ends meet, with the explicit goal of promoting strategies that work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes. Dental care access for low-income Marylanders has been an advocacy priority for us for many years since one of our client's children, 12-year-old Deamonte Driver, died of an untreated tooth infection in 2007. Deamonte's death began a movement across the country that led to Medicaid covering comprehensive child dental care. 15 years later, despite knowing that oral health is key to improving health outcomes, Maryland Medical Assistance (Medicaid) still does not provide comprehensive dental coverage for all adult beneficiaries. **PJC stands in strong support of HB 6**, which would finally expand Maryland Medicaid to provide full adult dental coverage.

**Maryland has fallen behind most of the country for adult dental care coverage in Medicaid.** Currently, Maryland provides dental coverage to adults under 65 who are dually eligible for Medicaid and Medicare. This leaves most adult beneficiaries without full dental coverage and places Maryland behind more than 30 other states that provide limited or comprehensive adult dental coverage to beneficiaries. Socioeconomic status should not be a barrier to attaining good oral health. HB 6, if passed, would bring Maryland in line with most of the country in providing a dental benefit.

**By expanding Medicaid to cover dental care for adults, HB 6 promotes health equity and cost savings.** Chronic oral health conditions can lead to tooth loss, nutrition problems and chronic pain. It can also impact speech, sleep, work, socializing and can make individuals more susceptible to other diseases. When preventative dental care is not available, Medicaid beneficiaries must turn to emergency rooms to treat chronic dental issues, increasing the emergency room utilization rate. According to a fiscal year 2016 study by DentaQuest Institute, adults in

Maryland made 42,327 emergency room visits for chronic dental conditions that year.<sup>1</sup> Maryland Medicaid paid for 53% of those visits, even though Medicaid participants only accounted for 15% of the adult population in Maryland.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, “across all years, Blacks also have by far the highest population rates of dental/oral health related condition discharges and the proportion of dental/oral health related condition discharges among this racial group increased from 48% in 2010 to 52% by 2013.”<sup>3</sup> HB 6 would not only help eliminate dental health inequities, but it would also result in cost savings and reduce emergency room utilization rates by adult Medicaid beneficiaries.

To eliminate dental health disparities and promote the overall wellness of Marylanders, the State must invest in the oral health of low-income adults. For these reasons, the Public Justice Center urges the committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report for **HB 6**. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Ashley Black at 410-625-9409 x 224 or [blacka@publicjustice.org](mailto:blacka@publicjustice.org).

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<sup>1</sup> *Financial Impact of Emergency Department Visits by Adults for Dental Conditions in Maryland*, DentaQuest Institute (2017), <http://www.mdac.us/pdf/Financial%20Impact%20of%20Hospital%20Visits%20for%20Dental%20Conditions%20in%20MD%20Revised%20Legislative.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Natalie I. Chalmers, *Racial Disparities in Emergency Department Utilization for Dental/Oral Health-Related Conditions in Maryland* (2017), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2017.00164/full>