

**House Bill 6 Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Dental Coverage for Adults**

Health and Government Operations Committee

February 9, 2022

**Position: SUPPORT**

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates, and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness, and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 6.

HB 6 expands Maryland Medicaid to include comprehensive dental care coverage for adults whose annual household income is at or below 133% of the federal poverty level.

Mental health and oral health have bidirectional impacts. Untreated dental diseases can lead to tooth loss, and individuals with severe mental illness are 2.8 times as likely to lose all their teeth compared to the general population. Poor oral hygiene can have an adverse effect on self-esteem and confidence, and self-neglect related to depression can lead to poor oral care. Many medications prescribed to treat mental health disorders can cause dry mouth and oral bacterial infections, and many medications prescribed to treat dental pain may prove harmful to someone in recovery from a substance use disorder.

The CDC estimates 40% of low-income and non-Hispanic Black adults in the United States have untreated tooth decay, and nearly 29% of low-income adults report the appearance of their mouth and teeth affects their ability to interview for jobs. Approximately 40% of low-income or uninsured adults have untreated cavities, are twice as likely to have 1-3 untreated cavities, and three times as likely to have 4+ untreated cavities.<sup>1</sup>

Dental emergencies in Maryland are too often treated in hospital emergency rooms. Unfortunately, these settings do not perform extractions or otherwise treat the *causes* of dental pain. Rather, they treat the *symptoms* by sending patients home with antibiotics, pain medications, or referrals.<sup>2</sup> Expanding Maryland's Medicaid program to include comprehensive dental coverage for adults will help alleviate an overreliance on hospital emergency departments.

Maryland is one of just three states without Medicaid adult dental coverage. This results in far too many Marylanders who are subject to oral health issues and dental pain that can make it difficult to obtain employment and can compound or adversely impact recovery from a behavioral health disorder. For these reasons, MHAMD supports HB 6 and urges a favorable report.

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (February 2021). [https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/oral\\_health\\_disparities/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/oral_health_disparities/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.chcs.org/media/Medicaid-Adult-Dental-Benefits-Overview-Appendix\\_091519.pdf](https://www.chcs.org/media/Medicaid-Adult-Dental-Benefits-Overview-Appendix_091519.pdf)

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