



TESTIMONY TO THE HEALTH AND GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

HB 06: Maryland Medical Assistance Program- Dental Coverage for Adults

POSITION: Support

BY: Nancy Soreng, President

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Following a two-year study in the 1990's, the League of Women Voters of the United States developed a comprehensive position supporting a health care system that provides access to affordable, quality health care for all Americans and protects patients' rights. The League of Women Voters of Maryland (LWVMD) **supports HOUSE BILL 6**, which would expand Maryland Medical Assistance coverage to include dental care for eligible adults.

Oral health and dental care are essential to our general health and well-being. As former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop said in 1993: "You're not healthy without good oral health." Untreated oral disease can contribute to broader infections, which can have serious and even fatal consequences. This was sadly shown by the tragic death of Deamonte Driver: a twelve-year-old Maryland boy who in 2007 died of an untreated tooth abscess after the infection spread to his brain. After that horrific death, dental benefits did become available to eligible Maryland children, but Medicaid still does not provide dental coverage to most eligible adults.

Without adequate dental care, patients with untreated infections can be forced to seek relief in hospital Emergency Departments. This is the least cost-effective site of care, and burdens our already overtaxed hospitals, especially during the Covid pandemic. The Center for Health Care Strategies noted in their September 2019 "Medicaid Adult Dental Benefits: An Overview" that: *-A recent study identified \$2.7 billion in dental-related hospital emergency department visits in the U.S. over a three-year-period.*

Many serious oral health conditions, including infections, abscesses, periodontal disease, oral cancer, and tooth loss leading to impaired mastication and inadequate nutrition could be preventable or treatable with access to routine dental screenings and care. Tooth loss in particular can have profoundly negative effects on the well-being of patients, with loss of self-confidence and diminished job prospects.

Disparities in oral health affect Maryland's most vulnerable and high-risk populations, causing needless pain and suffering while clearly diminishing patients' quality of life. By expanding access to dental coverage, House Bill 6 would reduce those health disparities and improve the health of all Marylanders, while ultimately reducing overall health care costs.

The League urges the committee to give a favorable report to HOUSE BILL 6.