

Oral Health Literacy & Awareness Act (S. 403/H.R. 994)

Please urge your Senator and your Representative to cosponsor S.403/H.R. 994, the *Oral Health Literacy & Awareness Act*.

S. 403/H.R. 994 would authorize \$750,000 per year over a five-year period for the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to establish an evidence-based education campaign to promote oral health literacy among vulnerable populations.

This legislation was introduced by Senators Ben Cardin (D-MD), Ray Luján (D-NM) and Susan Collins (R-ME) alongside Representatives Tony Cárdenas (D-CA-29) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL-12).

Identical legislation passed the House in the 117th Congress by a 369-58 vote and was pending before the Senate HELP Committee. We urge the 118th Congress to once again act on this important legislation.

Background

Oral health literacy (OHL) is defined as the individual capacity to understand and use dental information to transform oral health behaviors and is critical to increasing utilization of the oral health care system and improving health outcomes.

Studies estimate that anywhere between 30 to 50 percent of all Americans forgo dental health care. Not using the oral health care system as recommended (e.g., routine visits), can result in the development of serious preventable diseases such as tooth decay, periodontal disease, and oral cancer.[1,2] Untreated dental disease can lead to chronic pain, disfigurement, and death and contributes to the progression of other diseases including diabetes, heart disease, and Alzheimer's disease.

One study estimates that illnesses related to oral health result in 6.1 million days of bed disability, 12.7 million days of restricted activity, and 20.5 million days of lost workdays each year.[3] Additionally, data indicates that costs associated with nontraumatic emergency room visits for dental procedures may exceed \$1.7 billion per year.[4]

While HRSA has begun undertaking certain efforts in this area, more can be done through a congressionally authorized program. Enacting S.403/H.R. 994 would provide HRSA with the dedicated funding necessary to bolster its novel and critical OHL campaign.

S. 403/H.R. 994 Oral Health Literacy & Awareness Act

The *Oral Health Literacy & Awareness Act* would establish a public health education campaign across existing HRSA programs to promote OHL. The campaign would:

- Communicate directly with specific populations, including children, pregnant women, parents, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic and racial minorities in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.
- Use evidence-based strategies to promote oral health education, including education on the prevention of oral disease and early childhood caries, periodontal disease, and oral cancer among the medically vulnerable.
- Operate across existing agency programs including the health center program, oral health workforce programs, maternal and child health programs, the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, and rural health programs.

S.403/H.R. 994 would provide medically vulnerable patients with the tools necessary to seek out regular dental care and prevent the development of serious disease.

Who is the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD)?

Founded in 1952, the AGD has over 40,000 members from across the United States and is the only professional association that exclusively represents the needs and interests of general dentists. As the country's second-largest dental association, AGD works to promote oral health to the public and foster general dentists' continued proficiency through quality continuing education.

References

- [1] Chad D. Meyerhoefer, Irina Panovska, and Richard J. Manski. Projections Of Dental Care Use Through 2026: Preventive Care to Increase While Treatment Will Decline. Health Affairs. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2016.0833> (accessed March 20, 2023).
- [2] Michelle Lambright Black. Nearly Half of Insured Americans Skip Dental Visits, Procedures Due to Cost. Value Penguin. <https://www.valuepenguin.com/dental-survey> (accessed March 20, 2023).
- [3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, 2000. NIH publication 00-4713. Available from: URL: <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/oralhealth/>
- [4] Wall, T, Nasseh, K. Vujicic, M. Majority of Dental-Related Emergency Department Visits Lack Urgency and Can be Diverted to Dental Offices. ADA Research Brief. August 2014. https://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIBrief_0814_1.ashx (accessed March 20, 2023).