



Disability Policy Consortium

Call To Action: Urgent Need to Address The Oral Health Needs of People With Disabilities

Did You Know?

Nationally

- People with disabilities and other medical conditions are more likely to have poor oral health¹.
- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities have more difficulty finding dental providers who are trained to accommodate their unique needs, further limiting their options for care².
- Nearly one-third of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have untreated cavities³.

In Massachusetts

- According to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey, in 2016⁴:
 - 62.3% of adults with disabilities versus 77.4% of adults with no disabilities reported seeing a dentist in the past year.
 - 30.5% of adults with disabilities were missing 6 or more teeth, compared to 8.9% of adults with no disabilities.
- In 2014, only 35% of dentists treated a patient on MassHealth⁵.
- The lack of dentists who serve adults with disabilities causes delays in care and more emergency room visits for dental care⁶.

“Oral health is a particular concern for populations with high medical needs because, in many cases, there are additional hurdles that hinder their ability to access the dental services they need to be healthy. One example of these challenges is the shortage of dental providers who accept MassHealth, and many who do may not have the additional training or office space needed to treat persons with disabilities.”- Amy Rosenthal, Executive Director of Health Care For All (HCFA)

What Is Being Done To Help People With Disabilities Get Better Dental Care In Massachusetts?

- Certain dental facilities specialize in treating people with disabilities, these include:
 - Tufts Dental Facilities: Located across Massachusetts: <https://dental.tufts.edu/patient-care/teaching-clinics/tufts-dental-facilities>.
 - Community Health Neighborhood Dental Centers: In Pittsfield (413-447-2781) and Great Barrington (413-528-5565). <https://www.chpberkshires.org/dental/>.
 - Franciscan Children’s Hospital Dentistry: Located in Brighton: (617-254-3800 option 4) <https://franciscanchildrens.org/dentistry-and-surgery/>.
- MassHealth provides some transportation for appointments: 1-800-841-2900; 1-800-497-46480. (TTY); <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/hst/masshealth-transportation-consumer-brochure.pdf>.
- The advocacy group, Health Care For All, has actively promoted the following oral health legislation⁷:
 - H. 2474/S.1169: An Act Authorizing Dental Therapists to Expand Access to Oral Health, introduced by Rep. Pignatelli and Sen. Chandler and authorizes dental therapists in Massachusetts.
 - H. 1225: An Act Relative to the Restoration of MassHealth Adult Dental Benefits, sponsored by Representative Scibak in 2015, would restore full MassHealth dental benefits to over 800,000 people, including 180,000 people with disabilities.

- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) conducted a survey in 2014 which found that dentists in Massachusetts want to become more educated in treating people with disabilities⁸.

What Factors Make It Harder For People With Disabilities To Get Oral Health Services?

Some factors that limit access to dental care for people with disabilities include:

- Behavioral challenges can make it harder for people with developmental disabilities to undergo dental procedures⁹.
- To receive dental care, people with developmental disabilities may need tools such as rubber mouth props and specialized sedation methods that not all dentists are trained to use¹⁰.
- Arranging transportation to dentist appointments can be challenging.
- Dentists' offices aren't always large enough to accommodate wheelchairs¹¹.
- The American Dental Association's Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct currently does not generally prohibit dental practitioners from refusing care to patients based on their disability. However, it does state that it is unethical to refuse care to patients with bloodborne illnesses¹².

How Can Dental Providers Improve Oral Healthcare For People With Disabilities?

- The Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center offers an online webinar "Oral Health Practices" that can help providers increase their skills in treating people with disabilities:
<https://shriver.umassmed.edu/programs/cdder/webinars/oral-health-practices>.
- The NIH has downloadable materials that dental practitioners can use to help them treat people with developmental disabilities: <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/developmental-disabilities>.
- Dental practitioners could also provide more training to family members and caregivers to help maintain the oral health of people with developmental disabilities¹³.

How Advocates Can Help Improve Access to Oral Healthcare For People With Disabilities

The Disability Policy Consortium (DPC) recommends that advocates:

- Connect people with disabilities with dental clinics like those listed earlier in this issue brief.
- Encourage dental providers to take advantage of training sessions, such as those mentioned above, to enhance their abilities to treat people with disabilities.
- Encourage caregivers to provide assistance to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities with their at-home oral care to help them maintain good oral health.
- Encourage researchers to further examine the dental care needs of people with intellectual disabilities to improve care.
- Urge legislators to pass H. 2474/S.1169 to authorize dental therapists in Massachusetts and H.1225 to give dental benefits back to MassHealth enrollees¹⁴.

The DPC is a statewide cross-disability civil rights organization. Visit us online: www.dpcma.org.



MASSACHUSETTS

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- ⁸ Festa, K., Lin, T & Steffensen, J. (2018, April). Analysis of the Health Professions Data Series: Massachusetts Dentists are Interested in Education about Caring for Patients with Disabilities. Poster presentation at the National Oral Health Conference, Louisville, KY. <http://www.nationaloralhealthconference.com/index.php?page=presentations>. Contact Kate Festa at: kate.festa@state.ma.us.
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