

Alaska Commission on Aging Priority:

**Medicaid Adult Dental Program Cap
HB 265, SB 199**

February, 2010

Issue:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) was a strong proponent of the original 2006 legislation which added preventive and restorative dental care to the array of services available to adult Medicaid recipients. At the time, we realized that some low-income seniors were living with painful, destructive dental problems because they could not afford to pay for routine dental exams or dentures. Dental services for Medicaid recipients prior to 2006 were limited to expensive emergency care for relief of pain and acute infection only – often leading to unnecessary extraction of permanent teeth. The ACoA also strongly supported the successful re-authorization of the Medicaid adult dental program in 2009.

The program, however, features a cap on services of \$1,150 per fiscal year, which in 2006 was adequate for a participant to receive one denture (upper or lower), with the understanding that he or she could receive a complete set of dentures over the course of two fiscal years. In practice, not only has the cost of dentures risen, but it has come to light that on occasion a participant may need a complete set of dentures in the middle of the fiscal year; a forced wait till the beginning of the next fiscal year for the second denture places the individual at risk for malnutrition and even depression, as their quality of life deteriorates.

HB 265 and SB 199 would allow an eligible recipient to receive a full set of dentures in one fiscal year, utilizing two years' maximum payments under the program. The recipient would not be eligible for additional benefits under the program for a two-year period.

Background:

Adults remain at high risk for dental decay, especially elderly and other adults on certain medications or undergoing cancer treatments that decrease saliva output. Studies have also shown the link between oral health and chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. For seniors, the inability to properly chew food due to poor dentition leads to chronic malnutrition and its many consequences for health. Furthermore, those with ill-fitting dentures, missing teeth, no dentures, and other disfiguring dental problems may avoid the social engagement that is so essential to maintaining mental and physical health for seniors.

Program statistics for the period April 1, 2007 (start of the program) through December 31, 2009 indicate the following:

- 3,104 seniors were served by this program, comprising 18.8 percent of all those served under the program.
- Approximately 1,200 seniors received at least one denture under the program, 37.4 percent of the total persons who received dentures.
- Expenses for seniors totaled 22.4 percent of total program expenses.
- The average cost of care provided to a senior on the program was \$981.11.
- Current authorized reimbursement for a complete set of dentures is \$2,210 – slightly less than the two years' combined cap of \$2,300.

Recommendation:

Given the modest demand and cost for this critical health-related service, the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) prefers legislation to remove the annual program cap altogether, or raise the cap to cover likely cost increases for dental care over a five-year period. However, the ACoA does support passage of SB 199 and HB 265, which will allow combining of two years' caps in one year in order to allow a program participant to receive a complete set of dentures in one year. This legislation provides a common-sense solution that allows patients and their dentists the flexibility to schedule treatment around the oral health needs of the patient. Moreover, it will improve cost efficiencies by reducing the number of oral surgery visits, medical procedures, and related travel costs now required by individuals who need a complete set of dentures.