

Policy At A Glance:

Action for Dental Health Act of 2023 (H.R. 3843)

The Action for Dental Health Act (H.R. 3843) aims to continue supporting organizations that provide oral health care to underserved populations through fiscal year 2028. This brief provides an overview of the current crisis in dental care, the 2021 WHO Resolution on Oral Health, and the Action for Dental Health program.

Introduction

Signed into law on December 11, 2018 by President Donald Trump, the Action for Dental Health Act of 2018 (H.R. 2422) aimed to enhance oral healthcare accessibility for more Americans by allocating funding to crucial oral health initiatives and breaking down barriers that hinder patients from accessing care.^{1,2} The Act renewed grants through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in collaboration with the Health Resources and Services Administration.¹ These funds have supported initiatives, such as oral health education, disease prevention, and improved access to care. Moreover, HR 2422 broadened the eligibility criteria for receiving federal funds, including academic institutions, state dental associations, non-profit community-based organizations, and state and local health and dental departments.² The funding for these grants, however, ended in fiscal year 2023.

Passed in the House on March 7, 2024, the Action for Dental Health Act of 2023 (H.R. 3843) aims to renew the provisions defined in the 2018 Action for Dental Health Act. HR 3843 aims to continue supporting organizations that provide oral health care to underserved populations through fiscal year 2028.³

This brief provides an overview of the current crisis in dental care, the 2021 WHO Resolution on Oral Health, and the Action for Dental Health program.

Key Oral Health Statistics

- 52%** Of children over the age of 8 have had a cavity in their primary (baby) teeth.⁴
- 43%** Of adults aged 65 and older who have lost all their teeth were smokers.⁵
- 40%** Of low-income adults have untreated cavities.⁶
- 25.9%** Of adults aged 20-44 have untreated dental cavities.⁷
- 13.2%** Of children aged 5-19 have untreated dental cavities.⁷

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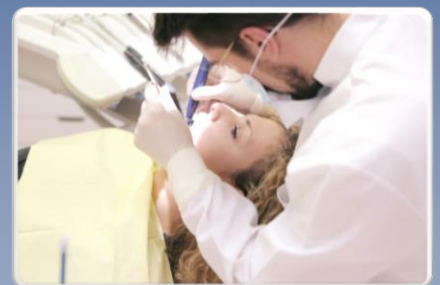
The Crisis in Dental Care

While there have been significant advancements in the oral health of Americans over the last 75 years, it is still far from ideal, particularly among low-income households.⁸ Many individuals in Dental Care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) face barriers to accessing adequate oral healthcare, contributing to a vicious cycle of poverty and poorer overall health.^{8,9} Challenges in accessing dental services compel them to either travel long distances or forgo necessary care, exacerbating the situation.^{8,9,10} This is due to the fact that the United States is currently facing a shortage of dentists, dental hygienists, and dental therapists, especially in rural regions of the nation.⁸ In 2024, an estimated 57 million Americans reside in dental care HPSAs, with roughly 67% of these located in rural communities.¹¹

Moreover, a large portion of the population struggle to afford dental care compared to other healthcare services. Research has shown that in 2015, at least 29% of the U.S. population did not have dental insurance.¹¹ This is further exacerbated by the fact that many dentists do not accept Medicaid, nor does it routinely cover dental care for adults 21 and older, further perpetuating the barriers faced by vulnerable populations in accessing essential dental care.^{8,11,12} Nationwide, only half of the 39 million children enrolled in Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) receive dental care, compared with the 67% of children covered by private insurance.⁹

2021 WHO Resolution on Oral Health

On May 27, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) approved the resolution on oral health. The resolution suggests a transition from the traditional focus on treating oral health issues to a preventative approach.^{13,14} This involves promoting oral health within schools and workplaces and ensuring timely and comprehensive care in primary healthcare systems.^{13,15} Furthermore, in 2022, the WHO adopted a global strategy for oral health aimed at achieving universal health coverage for oral health by 2030.¹³ The Global Oral Health Action Plan's Monitoring Framework targets 80% global population access to essential oral health care by 2030. Currently, only 23% have access to essential oral health care globally.¹⁶



Action for Dental Health Program

Since 2018, the Action for Dental Health program, initiated by the American Dental Association (ADA), has allocated \$13.9 million per fiscal year through fiscal year 2023 to support the Health Resources and Services Administration's grant program aimed at enhancing the dental workforce and increasing access to oral health through HR 2422.^{3,17} Specifically, the program aims to improve the oral health care of individuals and communities by emphasizing prevention and early intervention, expanding access to dental care, and promoting oral health literacy.¹⁸ Therefore, HR 3843 aims to continue funding for the Action for Dental Health program through fiscal year 2028.³

Emergency Department Referrals

The inappropriate and continuous use of hospital emergency departments (ED) for non-traumatic dental care is contributing to increasing healthcare costs and often leaves individuals without proper care.^{18,19} This is because EDs often lack adequate diagnostic tools or staff trained in dentistry to properly identify, diagnose, and treat dental conditions. Furthermore, definitive treatments, such as tooth extractions, are often not offered in the ED. This often leads to temporary solutions, such as prescriptions for antibiotics and pain medications, without addressing the underlying conditions. Consequently, nearly 40% of patients return to the ED for the same or similar dental issues.^{18,19}

Therefore, the Action for Dental Health program provides funding for the Emergency Department Referral Initiative. The Initiative serves as a framework for facilitating collaboration between urgent care facilities and primary care providers to enhance accessibility to comprehensive, preventive

dental services. This effort decreases overall expenses and provides patients with appropriate and cost-effective treatment options.¹⁹

Medicaid Reform

Many states' Medicaid dental programs do not cover the necessary levels of preventative and restorative care required by low-income beneficiaries. Therefore, the Action for Dental Health program advocates for increased dental health provisions within Medicaid, particularly in states where Medicaid expansion has not been implemented.¹⁹

Maintaining Community Water Fluoridation

Community water fluoridation is one of the most efficient ways to prevent tooth decay, preventing at least 25% of tooth decay in children and adults.^{19,20} Therefore, the Action for Dental Health program aims to ensure that at least 77% of the US population has access to adequately fluoridated water by 2030 through partnerships with communities.¹⁸

Community Dental Health Coordinators

Community Dental Health Coordinators (CDHC) work to address barriers in adequate oral healthcare by assisting individuals who often do not seek dental services due to factors such as poverty, language and cultural barriers, and geographical constraints.^{18,21} CDHCs contribute to enhancing the oral health of individuals in underserved areas where many lack access to necessary dental care.²¹ Therefore, the Action for Dental Health program aims to continue funding CDHCs in various underserved communities.¹⁸

Conclusion

Since its implementation in 2018, the Action for Dental Health Act has enhanced dental care in communities throughout the United States, bolstering the dental safety net, and introduced disease prevention and education to underserved communities.²³ Reauthorization of the Action for Dental Health Care Act through HR 3843 will continue the ongoing efforts to overcome barriers in oral healthcare services, including addressing workforce challenges and reducing the prevalence of untreated dental diseases among both adults and children.^{1,3} Efforts to reduce disparities in oral health can contribute to achieving health equity, ensuring that all individuals have equal and equitable opportunities to attain their highest level of health.¹¹ Of note, HR 3843 still needs to pass the Senate and be signed by the President before it can go into effect.

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Did you know?

Nearly 42% of all adults aged 30 years and older have gum disease (periodontitis) and nearly 8% have severe periodontitis.²³



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