

April 1st, 2022

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chair
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Tester and Ranking Member Moran:

We write to you urging the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to advance S.3017, the Veterans Dental Care Eligibility Expansion and Enhancement Act of 2021, in support of improved access for veteran dental care. Currently, only 15% of veterans are eligible for dental care through the VA system.¹ The remaining 85% of veterans who are not eligible for dental care through the VA struggle with access to affordable, quality dental care that meets their physical and oral health needs. A fragmented oral health care system is one many Americans experience; however, veterans are more significantly impacted given the disproportionate burden of disease and disability they face as a result of their service to our country.

Oral health outcomes for veterans are worse than nonveterans. According to a recent analysis of National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data performed by The American Institute of Dental Public Health (AIDPH) and CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, 42% of veterans reported having had gum problems or bone loss around their teeth, a significantly higher proportion than nonveterans (27%).² Similarly, more than half (56%) of the veterans reported active and treated decay, a significantly higher percentage than the nonveteran population (37%). Roughly 2 in 5 veterans described their oral health as fair or poor, translating into approximately 8 million veterans with self-reported suboptimal oral health. Recent surveys of veterans conducted by AIDPH and CareQuest Institute indicate these outcomes are related to the lack of access to oral health care services. More than 44% of veterans surveyed experienced pain or discomfort in the last year but couldn't see a dentist due to cost, no available appointments, or no proximal access to a dentist³. The inability to afford or source dental care directly translates into increased visits to emergency departments. Just over 6% of veterans surveyed visited an ED for dental pain in the past year - 2% more than the national average - resulting in an estimated \$1.7 billion spent that could have been

¹ <https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2022VAbudgetInBrief.pdf>

² https://www.carequest.org/system/files/CareQuest_Institute_Veteran-Oral-Health.pdf

³ These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

avoided through routine access to dental care.⁴ Taken together, these data indicate that veterans are not able to find dental care they can afford, and as a result, the economic burden of care becomes substantial.

Oral health directly impacts physical health. According to NHANES, 22% of veterans are living with diabetes compared to 10% of nonveterans. Similarly, veterans experience heart attacks at five times the rate of nonveterans. The established connection between heart disease and diabetes to negative oral health outcomes indicates veterans living with chronic disease conditions have the ability to be physically healthier with routine access to preventive dental care.⁵ Our estimates reveal that if veterans have a utilization rate of just 25% for treating gum disease, over \$3 billion dollars are saved annually in consequential treatment of heart disease and diabetes.⁶ These financial savings are considerable, especially if paired with the costs of emergency department visits. Economic effects are compounded through workplace implications of poor oral health. More than 55% of veterans indicated they had difficulty interviewing for a job because of the appearance of their teeth. Twice as many veterans compared to nonveterans had to take time off work because of the state of their mouth/teeth.⁷ Veterans who don't get dental care face increased health concerns and are more likely to experience prolonged pain, resulting in missed workdays and less productivity.

Veterans cannot be healthy without good oral health. Collectively, the organizations below believe that optimal oral health can be achieved with improved, reliable access to affordable, high-quality dental care for veterans. The provisions outlined in S.3017 expand eligibility requirements such that more veterans can receive dental care through the VA, thereby addressing barriers to accessing care for many veterans and alleviating the chronic disease burden they experience through inadequate oral health care. The 71 organizations listed below urge you again to consider this bill in committee and support equitable access to oral health for our nation's veterans.

⁴ These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

⁵ <https://www.cigna.com/assets/docs/business/large-employers/dental-white-paper.pdf>

⁶ These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

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National Organizations

American Association for Community Dental Programs
American Association of Public Health Dentistry
American Institute of Dental Public Health
American Dental Hygienists' Association
American Federation of Government Employees
American Network of Oral Health Coalitions
Association of State and Territorial Dental Direct
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health
Center for Medicare Advocacy
Coalition of Veterans Organizations
Combat Sexual Assault
Community Catalyst
Common Defense
DAV (Disabled American Veterans)
Dental Lifeline Network
Everyone for Veterans
Families USA
HunterSeven Foundation
Justice in Aging
Military Women's Coalition
Minority Veterans of America
Modern Military Association of America
National Association of Community Health Centers
National Bioethics Center at Tuskegee University
National Coalition of Dentist for Health Equity
National Network for Oral Health Access
National Rural Health Association
Never Alone Advocacy
Oral Health Nursing Education and Practice
Oral Health Progress and Equity Network
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Recovering Your Soul
Senior Charity Care Foundation
Service Women's Action Network
Service: Women Who Serve
The American Legion
The Pink Berets
United Health Organization
Veteran Legislative Voice
Veterans For Peace
Veterans for Unification
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Veterans Smile Program
Vets for Trump
WINC For All Women Veterans
4 Oral Health LLC
6ix Inc

State Organizations

Arizona Oral Health Coalition
Floridians For Dental Access
Generations Dental (Idaho)
Idaho Oral Health Alliance
Indiana Oral Health Coalition
Klamath Basin Oral Health Coalition
Louisiana Oral Health Coalition
Maine Oral Health Coalition
Maryland Dental Action Coalition
Minnesota Oral Health Coalition
Missouri Coalition for Oral Health
New Jersey Oral Health Coalition
New York State Oral Health Coalition
Oklahoma Oral Health Coalition
Oral Health Iowa
Oral Health Kansas, Inc.
Oral Health Ohio
Oregon Oral Health Coalition
Pennsylvania Coalition for Oral Health
Texas Association of Community Health Centers
Texas Oral Health Coalition, Inc
The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, Inc.
Virginia Health Catalyst
West Virginia Oral Health Coalition