

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Alaska Commission on Aging

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January 31, 2009

Senator Johnny Ellis
Senate Health and Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Room 103
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Subject: Support Letter for SB 65

Dear Senator Ellis:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) encourages support of SB 65, a bill to reauthorize preventive and restorative dental services for adult Medicaid recipients, sponsored by Senator Davis and co-sponsored by you. Medicaid coverage for these services will sunset June 30, 2009 without legislative reauthorization.

Good nutrition is vital for health and wellness across the life span and depends on oral health. Dental pain, missing and decayed teeth affect dietary choices for seniors which impacts overall health and wellness. Without preventive and restorative dental services, which include exams, fillings, extractions, and dentures, older vulnerable Alaskans are at risk of developing dental infections that have been associated with periodontal disease, diabetes, pneumonia, and other chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease. Currently, Medicaid dental services are limited to expensive emergency care for immediate relief of pain and acute infection, with no coverage for preventative and restorative dental care. These limited services often lead to extraction of permanent teeth.

Children can also benefit from the enhanced Medicaid adult dental program. Research has shown that bacteria involved with the dental decay process are typically passed from parent to child or from grandparent to grandchild, in situations where the grandparent is the primary caregiver, and that part of the efforts to reduce dental decay in young children relates to reducing the level of dental infection in the caregiver. Moreover, primary caregivers with dental coverage are more likely to access dental services for their children.

In addition to the health issues involved, decayed or missing teeth can be a factor in employability or job advancement, which is of concern to all persons seeking employment, regardless of age. Preventive and restorative dental services result in fewer tooth extractions for Medicaid clients and offer increase chance of employment.

Preventive and restorative dental services can help prevent the progression of serious dental disease and discomfort which may result in more costly emergency care. These services contain future Medicaid costs for emergency dental work, assist in chronic disease prevention, and promote healthy lifestyles.

Since inception on April 1, 2007 through September 30, 2008, this program has served 9,267 unduplicated persons with 283 providers participating who have performed 42,268 procedures. During FY 2008 alone, 7,470 Alaskans received services through this program.

Because infections in the mouth are no different than infections in other parts of the body, ACoA believes that the enhanced dental program should continue for as long as possible and we appreciate the retroactive feature of your bill that extends coverage if the legislation is passed after the sunset date. Currently, the limit for services is \$1,150 per year per Medicaid beneficiary. We suggest that the cap for services be re-considered in context of current costs for providing dental care. We understand that the average cost for dentures has increased to \$1,700 or \$1,800 for one set. According to estimates from the National Dental Advisory Service, for example, the estimated median charge in Alaska for a set of dentures is in excess of \$2,900.

ACoA supports SB 65 and believes that this program is a wise public investment that will help reduce expensive emergency dental needs, associated costs in health care, and enhance health and wellness for elderly Alaskans. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director (465-4879), should you have any questions regarding our position. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark
Chair Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

CC: Senator Bettye Davis, Chair
Senator Joe Paskvan, Vice-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas
Senator Fred Dyson