Lack of oral health access is a significant reason that in 2010, emergency room charges for patients with dental conditions generally considered preventable exceeded $88 million. A third of those 115,000 visits were charged to Medicaid, totalling $29.7 million.\(^1\)

Only 790 Florida dentists – less than 8 percent of practicing dentists – are available for the 3.7 million Floridians eligible for Medicaid, including dental providers in county health departments and federally qualified health centers. Six counties have no Medicaid dentists and 13 have just one.\(^2\)

Access is further restricted by Medicaid policies that deny adults coverage for preventive and restorative services, creating a situation in which oral infections are allowed to deteriorate to the point where emergency treatment is required.

**ORAL HEALTH IS A SERIOUS HEALTH ISSUE**

Oral health is vital to overall wellness. Lack of dental care for children is responsible for missed school, poor nutrition, difficulty concentrating and learning delays. For adults, poor oral health is associated with heart disease and diabetes. Bacteria from untreated cavities can lead to infections elsewhere in the body. Such infections have proven fatal for some children.

Clearly, routine dental care is as important as other acceptable preventive practices like mammograms and annual influenza vaccines. Addressing state and local policies currently restricting access to preventive and restorative dental care may reduce costs throughout Florida’s healthcare system.\(^3\)

The impact of Florida Medicaid policy and oral-health access issues is felt in the state’s collective pocketbook. When every dollar spent on disease-preventive oral health services is estimated to save $8 to $50 in restorative and emergency services, the case for policy change is clear and compelling.

**FLORIDA’S ORAL HEALTH CHALLENGES**

1. A significant proportion of our population is unable to access routine dental care.
2. We have not maximized access to evidence-based preventive services, such as community water fluoridation, and clinical preventive services, such as dental sealants and topically applied fluorides.
3. The only dental care option for many is the hospital emergency room.
4. Despite a 2011 increase, Medicaid reimbursement rates remain too low for a private-practice dentist to offset the cost of care.

**Policy Solutions**

1. Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates & expand coverage to include adult preventive and restorative care. **Benefit:** Cost increases in expanding dental care would be offset by reduced emergency room spending.\(^2\)
2. Grant Florida Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) express authority to reimburse health access settings for dental hygiene services, which is needed to fully implement legislation passed in 2011. **Benefit:** Increase access and reduce cost of preventive dental services.
3. Expand fluoridation of community water supplies and oppose efforts to remove fluoride from the water supply. **Benefit:** Overwhelming scientific evidence supports community water fluoridation as safe and effective in preventing tooth decay and pays for itself in reduced dental care costs.\(^7\)

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