

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.<sup>1</sup> 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%).<sup>2</sup> 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 dentist<sup>3</sup>. 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

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

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.carequest.org/system/files/CareQuest\\_Institute\\_Veteran-Oral-Health.pdf](https://www.carequest.org/system/files/CareQuest_Institute_Veteran-Oral-Health.pdf)

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 These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

avoided through routine access to dental care.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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 These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

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

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 These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

<sup>7</sup> These survey data can be found in an unpublished report provided to SVAC committee members.

## **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