



## National Rural Health Association Oral Health Advocacy Agenda

### *National Rural Oral Health Initiative Task Force*

### 2023 – 2024

**Mission:** The National Rural Health Association’s (NRHA) National Rural Oral Health Initiative aims to establish oral health care as part of primary care, thereby increasing health care access for all rural Americans.

NRHA is a national, nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to provide leadership on rural issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. NRHA serves as the primary resource and advocate on rural health issues for federal legislation, regulations and federally sponsored rural health initiatives and programs.

#### **2023 NRHA Advocacy Priorities:**

- Addressing Rural Declining Life Expectancy and Rural Health Equity
- Reducing Rural Health Care Workforce Shortages
- Investing in a Strong Rural Safety Net

#### **Addressing Rural Declining Life Expectancy and Health Equity**

**Fluoride.** Fluoridation of public water systems is one of the top public health achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, a higher proportion of rural homes do not have access to fluoridated water. NRHA urges the following actions to ensure rural residents can receive the benefits of fluoride:

- Providing technical assistance and education billing under the new silver diamine fluoride (SDF) procedure code. This new CPT code was approved in 2022 to allow non-dental providers to bill for SDF application but a lack of guidance on how to bill has been a barrier to use in rural settings.

**Veterans’ oral health.** About one quarter of all veterans live in rural areas. Rural veterans are less likely to visit the dentist and more likely to have lost all their natural teeth compared to non-rural veterans. NRHA supports investing in rural veterans’ oral health by:

- Supporting, [S. 1954/H.R. 4150](#), the Improving Whole Health for Veterans with Chronic Conditions Act, which would start a pilot program to provide comprehensive dental care for veterans diagnosed with diabetes and heart disease.
- Supporting [H.R. 2410](#), the VET CARE Act of 2023, to create a 4-year pilot program to provide dental care to veterans diagnosed with diabetes.
- Urging passage of [H.R. 2413](#), the Dental Care for Veterans Act, which would make all veterans who are enrolled in the VA health care system eligible for VA-provided dental services.
- Funding a report on the ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to adequately meet the current and future dental needs of VHA-eligible veterans.

**Employability.** Poor oral health can affect factors outside of an individual’s health, like the ability to find and keep a job. In some instances, missing or broken teeth can be a [barrier](#) to hiring. NRHA supports policies:

- Removing barriers to accessing affordable dental care, like Medicaid and Medicare comprehensive coverage.
- Eliminating discrimination against individuals with edentulism.



**Data.** Up-to-date and accurate data on rural-specific oral health information is essential to furthering policies that improve rural oral health. Unfortunately, this data does not exist or is not easily accessible. NRHA advocates for:

- Funding the new Office of Rural Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at \$10 million for fiscal year 2024 to assist with analysis of rural data.
- Increasing investments in rural oral health research at the federal level through Rural Health Research Center Program at the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

## Reducing Rural Health Care Workforce Shortages

**Recruiting and retaining families.** One challenge in recruiting and retaining health professionals is attracting their families to rural areas. NRHA believes that investing in rural communities can make these areas more livable and attractive to dental practitioners with partners and children. NRHA advocates for:

- Supporting passage of [S. 1867/H.R. 3922](#), the Expanding Childcare in Rural America Act, to improve the availability and quality of childcare in rural communities.
- Reauthorizing and increasing funding for essential Rural Development programs that focus on stimulating local rural economic development.
- Providing housing vouchers or assistance for families moving to rural, underserved areas to practice dentistry.

**“Grow your own” and pipeline programs.** Research shows that one of the most effective ways to retain rural health care professionals is by keeping them in their community or giving them practice experience in a rural area. NRHA believes that this can be done by:

- Increasing funding for the National Health Service Corps program to \$125.6 million in fiscal year 2024 to continue recruiting dental professionals to underserved areas where they will be more likely to stay after practicing in the community.
- Creating programs within HRSA that target middle and high school students for dental careers in their hometowns.
- Using state-level health funding for local programs to reach K-12 students interested in health sciences and encourage them to pursue dental careers.

## Investing in a Strong Rural Health Safety Net

**Comprehensive Medicare dental benefit.** Medicare does not cover most dental services, including routine and preventative services, for our rural seniors. Dental coverage under Medicare is limited to scenarios that “are inextricably linked to, and substantially related and integral to the clinical success of, certain other covered medical services” in both inpatient and outpatient settings. NRHA supports:

- Expanding Medicare coverage to other clinical scenarios, particularly those related to diabetes or cardiovascular disease through the annual Physician Fee Schedule rulemaking.
- Supporting [H.R. 33](#), the Medicare Dental, Vision, and Hearing Benefit Act of 2023 and [S. 2012/H.R. 4146](#), the Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2023.

**Comprehensive Medicaid adult benefit.** About [one quarter of rural Americans](#) under 65 are covered by Medicaid. Currently, only 23 state Medicaid programs provide extensive adult dental coverage. NRHA supports extensive dental coverage across all states to ensure rural adults have access to oral health care by:



- Supporting [S. 570/H.R. 1342](#), the Medicaid Dental Benefit Act, to require Medicaid programs to cover dental and oral health services for all adults and increase the federal matching percentage for such services.
- Requiring all states provide 12 months of postpartum Medicaid coverage and include dental services during 12-month postpartum period in all states.
- Expanding Medicaid in non-expansion states so more rural residents can access Medicaid dental benefits.

**Care delivery.** The systems of oral health care delivery are changing, and rural communities should not be left behind. Many new, innovative delivery systems would benefit rural areas by increasing access through remote technology. NRHA supports:

- Creating demonstration projects at the Department of Health and Human Services to fund mobile dental units, virtual dental homes, and other evidence-based practices that support expanding access to preventative oral health care.