

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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August 1, 2017

The Honorable Daniel Tsai
Assistant Secretary for MassHealth
One Ashburton Place, 11th Floor
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Mr. Tsai,

Thank you for the work you do to promote equitable and accessible health care in the Commonwealth. Massachusetts remains a beacon of healthcare access and quality for the rest of the country. We maintain one of the highest rates of insured residents in the country and MassHealth has been a great partner in that success. I also respect the enormity of MassHealth's financial footprint on the state budget. Currently, the state government allocates around 40% of the budget to MassHealth expenditures.

I am writing to you on behalf of my constituents: dentists from Marshfield and Scituate who serve MassHealth patient populations. In particular, Dr. Johnson reached out to me last month, expressing concern about low MassHealth reimbursement rates. She is the only board-certified oral surgeon serving the Cape Cod MassHealth population. As she strives to serve all her patients equitably and justly, she struggles financially due to differences in private and public reimbursement rates. Within MassHealth, adult patients receive even lower reimbursement rates than children. These financial difficulties create an overwhelming hurdle for Dr. Johnson to serve her patients.

After speaking with Dr. Johnson, my office connected with other dental providers in my district to better understand how MassHealth rates impact the level and quality of care they provide. In general, the dentists reiterated that the MassHealth reimbursement system is not dependable. One provider advised he simply does not take MassHealth patients at all. Another stated she is forced to limit the number of MassHealth patients for whom she cares to ensure her business remains afloat.

From my many meetings and interactions with dental providers on legislation and budgetary matters, I know they are deeply committed to promoting access to high quality dental care. It is obvious, however, despite personal commitments, providers are forced to restrict access for MassHealth patients in order

to remain financially solvent. The founding principles of MassHealth include providing “affordable, quality, [and] integrated health care services.”¹ However, if providers are unable to serve MassHealth patients due to financial barriers, the Commonwealth is not upholding its promise to provide such care.

On behalf of my constituents and other dentists throughout the Commonwealth, I respectfully urge that MassHealth consider the following recommendations to ensure both providers and patients are treated equitably:

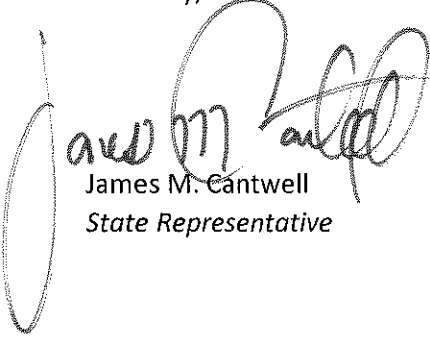
1. Increase MassHealth dental reimbursement rates to better cover significant business costs and ensure providers can be financially successful.
 - a. Providers who maintain large MassHealth patient populations must depend on MassHealth reimbursement for financial stability. Eighty percent of Dr. Johnson’s patients are covered by MassHealth. She does not have the flexibility to buffer her practice costs with private insurance patients.
2. Increase MassHealth adult dental reimbursement rates to mirror those of MassHealth pediatric dental reimbursement rates.
 - a. I suggest conducting a thorough study of the effects of higher pediatric dental reimbursement rates. If these higher rates have given more children access to dental care (due to more MassHealth providers), perhaps the same effect would occur if adult dental reimbursement rates were also increased.
3. Increase the number of reimbursed services under MassHealth dental coverage.
 - a. Dental providers strive to provide comprehensive care to their patients. However, MassHealth’s limited list of covered services inhibits their ability to do so. By expanding eligible services, our providers will be able to deliver more complete care.
4. Create and/or sustain open dialogue between MassHealth, dental providers, and legislators.
 - a. Ensuring our MassHealth population has access to appropriate dental care requires that all parties have a seat at the table. Policy changes will undoubtedly affect MassHealth administrators, providers, patients, and state budget makers. These voices must be part of constructive conversation from the onset.

Preventative and early intervention dental services will reduce complex dental issues and promote overall patient health, further reducing long term costs. When they do not get care at the dental office due to limited covered services (e.g. periodontal-related care), patients often visit hospitals to repair dental issues that could have been prevented with routine dental visits and comprehensive MassHealth dental coverage.

I appreciate how difficult it is for MassHealth to provide unlimited dental coverage with a limited budget. This interdependence between branches of government is why constant, open dialogue is crucial to the success of this program. To this end, I have supported multiple amendments in the past that pushed for additional MassHealth dental funding, including amendments to: (1) restore adult periodontal coverage; (2) increase funding for the Office of Oral Health; and (3) fund the Forsyth Kids school-based dental program.

I firmly stand behind MassHealth's mission to serve the most vulnerable of our residents. Please let me know if and how I can be of assistance in supporting the mission of high quality, accessible dental care in the Commonwealth. Thank you again for your commitment to the residents of Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James M. Cantwell". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "C".

James M. Cantwell
State Representative