



February 2026

MDAC's Policy and Programmatic Priorities for 2026

Strategies to maintain and improve oral health access in our state

The 2026 session of the Maryland General Assembly convened on January 8, in Annapolis, and will run for 90 days, or until April 7, 2026. The well publicized deficit in the state budget and detrimental implications of federal HR1 on thousands of Marylanders will make this an extremely challenging year for legislators and advocates. MDAC looks to its broad network of partners and stakeholders to sustain significant achievements and move forward to break alarming trends to improve access to dental care for Maryland children.

Maryland's progress in oral health did not happen by accident - it is the result of deliberate and incremental policy choices, informed leadership, and persistent advocacy.

Protect Comprehensive Medicaid Adult Dental Coverage

Maryland Medicaid has provided over 380,000 Maryland adults with dental care since the program launch in January 2023. The Maryland Department of Health (MDH)/Medicaid worked diligently with MDAC and our stakeholder community to build an effective coverage package of services within the limits of the State budget that provides comprehensive coverage of a range of preventative, diagnostic and restorative services without an annual ceiling on services provided to participants each year.

MDAC efforts to support adult dental expansion — through social media campaigns, outreach strategies, strategic engagement, and key partnerships—continue to deliver impressive and measurable results. While utilization data underscores the overwhelming success of the program, challenges exist with a shortfall in the state budget and harmful federal changes to Medicaid included in HR1. The latter will jeopardize access to care for hundreds of thousands of Marylanders and millions nationwide, with the biggest impact expected to occur next year. This threat underscores the urgency to reiterate the impact dental care has had on Maryland Medicaid participants, especially for the adult community.

To further document the critical importance of oral health and its impact on overall health and wellbeing, MDAC launching an initiative to collect stories and experiences of adult Marylanders who have accessed dental services through Maryland Medicaid's Maryland Healthy Smiles Dental Program to learn more about how the dental care people received through this program has impacted their lives.



Develop Strategies to Improve Children's Oral Health Through School Based Programs

According to Maryland Department of Health's Annual Oral Health Legislative Reports, the percentage of children with Medicaid who accessed preventative dental services increased from about 50% in 2008 to 64% in 2015. Progress plateaued during the 2016-2019 period with about 63-64% of children receiving preventative dental services under Medicaid. The numbers plummeted during COVID and have yet to rebound at just 56% of children obtaining preventive dental services in Medicaid in 2023. The declining numbers of children accessing dental services is concerning and MDAC is committed to developing strategies to improve oral health for children in our state.

During the 2025 session of the Maryland General Assembly, MDAC spearheaded advocacy work to secure passage of legislation establishing the Maryland Collaborative to Improve Children's Oral Health Through School-Based Programs. The bill ([SB 988/HB 1143](#)) supports children and Maryland families and launches a renewed public health approach to closing gaps for children to dental care. The bill created an interprofessional workgroup of dental hygienists, dentists, school nurses, and educational professionals to design evidenced-based public health programs. Potential approaches include:

- Expanding the utilization of dental hygienists providing preventative services.
- Exploring whether school nurses can play a role in applying fluoride varnishes under guidelines developed by Departments of Health and Education; and
- Developing practical strategies to connect students to permanent dental homes.

MDAC is alarmed at the declining access to dental services for children and, in collaboration with statewide partners, are confident that the [Collaborative to Improve Children's Oral Health Through School-Based Programs](#) will provide an important part of the roadmap to improve and safeguard the oral health of Maryland's children.

Workforce: Dental Hygiene Shortage in Maryland

Between 2019 and 2023, Maryland experienced a 10% decrease in its dental hygiene workforce (Source: ADA, Health Policy Institute). A recent national study found that workplace factors, including positive workplace culture, practice philosophy, growth opportunities, fair compensation, and effective communication within practices, contributed to higher job satisfaction among dental hygienists (Sasaki et al., 2025). These trends are impacting oral health care access across the state.

MDAC hosted the breakout session, *How Maryland Can Address the Dental Hygienist Shortage*, at its Oral Health Summit on November 17, 2025. The panel discussion and audience participation were highly engaged, and the group was energized to address the issues identified in the discussion. This conversation indicated to MDAC staff that additional information, input, and engagement from the larger dental hygiene stakeholder community is needed to effectively inform the development of strategies to address the dental hygiene workforce issue in the state.

Since this is a complex challenge requiring a multi-prong strategy, MDAC is planning to convene a series of listening sessions with dental hygienists to learn more about their concerns and ideas for potential solutions in 2026.

We invite you to get in touch with MDAC staff (info@mdac.us) to discuss ways you can support these initiatives.

Rural Health Transformation Program

Maryland receives award from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) distributes \$50 billion in funds over ten years to states to strengthen rural healthcare. Half of the funding is distributed evenly throughout the states, and the other half is based on the proportion of the population that lives in rural areas, potential for positive impact, and other factors. All 50 states applied for and were approved to receive RHTP funding, with totals ranging from \$281 million (Texas) to \$147 million (New Jersey). On



December 29, 2025, Maryland received a notice of award from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for \$168,180,837.61 for the first year, of five, of the RHTP.

Fourteen state proposals, including Maryland, mention strengthening oral health in rural areas in [project abstracts](#), incorporating oral health strategies to expand access to care, strengthen the workforce, and integration of dental care into broader health systems. Strategies to strengthen oral health access in rural communities include:

- **Workforce Development and Scope of Practice Expansion:** Many states emphasize strengthening the rural dental workforce through training pipelines, recruitment and retention strategies and scope-of-practice expansions – particularly for dental hygienists and allied providers – to address provider shortages and improve access to care.
- **Mobile, Teledentistry, and Remote Access Models:** States propose expanding mobile, portable and teledentistry models delivered through schools and community settings to facilitate the delivery of preventive and diagnostic dental services to rural residents.
- **Facility-Based Expansion and Specialized Dental Services:** Several states proposed upgrading facilities and establishing specialized dental centers, including integrated and special care clinics, to better serve patients with complex, high-need, or disability related dental conditions.
- **Technology Adoption, Efficiency, and Interoperability:** States emphasized investments in dental health IT, interoperability, and teledentistry tools to improve care coordination, efficiency, and integration across medical, behavioral, and dental care systems.
- **Community Integration and Expanded Access Points:** States highlighted community-embedded dental care models – such as school-based clinics and multidisciplinary teams – to reduce access barriers, support prevention, and integrate dental services with broader health care in the community.

Oral health components in the Maryland abstract include expanding the workforce by implementing new efforts to develop, recruit, and retain multiple types of clinicians and allied health professionals. Immediate plans include increasing apprenticeship opportunities and certificate programs. Long term plans include building a pipeline of future health professionals by expanding training, recruitment, and retention for providers.

On January 28, Dr. Elizabeth Kromm, Assistant Secretary for Population Health and Strategic Initiatives, Maryland Department of Health, presented its \$168M+ (Year 1) [RHTP program](#) to the Maryland General Assembly House Health Committee. During the presentation, MDH confirmed that RHTP would apply to all 18 rural counties, as MDH defines “rural” and that “Maryland received double the average amount per rural resident.”

MDH has established a [Maryland Rural Health Transformation \(RHT\) Committee](#) to continue its engagement with rural communities during implementation of the state’s

program. The committee, consisting of members representing perspectives of rural Maryland-based organizations and communities, meets virtually on an approximate quarterly basis in 2026 and all committee meetings will be open to the public, with dedicated time for public input. The first meeting is Thursday, February 26 at 10:00-11:30am. Meeting notes from all convenings will be published on the department's [RHTP webpage](#).

Maryland Rural Health Association Annual Legislative Forum



MDAC is proud to once again be an advocate sponsor of the annual **Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) Annual Legislative Forum**, taking place in Annapolis on March 4, 2026, **11:45 am - 1:00 pm**. This event will be held at the Senate Building, Miller West I, 11

Bladen St, Annapolis, MD 21401.

Please join colleagues from across the state to network, hear updates, and chat with members of the Maryland General Assembly. A limited number of tickets are available; register now to secure your spot! Registration cost is \$20 (Students: \$10) and lunch is included.

[Register for the MRHA Legislative Forum](#)

Maryland Department of Health 2025 Oral Health Legislative Report

Includes data on Medicaid adult dental coverage and other oral health safety net programs

The Maryland Medicaid Program and the Maryland Department of Health Office of Oral Health recently submitted the annual legislative report to the Governor and the Maryland General Assembly on efforts to improve oral health in Maryland.

The annual oral health report addresses the following initiatives: 1) dental care access under the Maryland Medical Assistance Program, as well as the Office of Oral Health's efforts to improve access; 2) the Oral Health Safety Net Program; 3) and the Oral Cancer Initiative. The report includes data and other information on the following, as well as other related oral health issues:

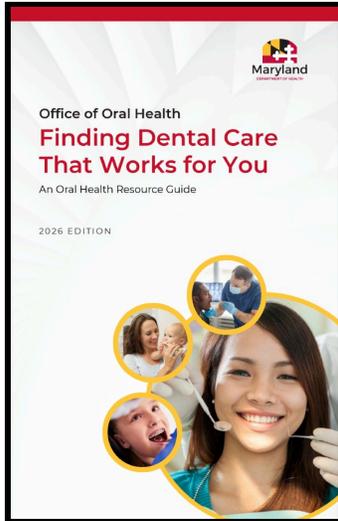
- Maryland Medicaid availability and accessibility of dentists;
- Medicaid dental administrative services organization utilization outcomes, and allocation and use of related dental funds;
- The results of the Oral Health Safety Net Program administered by the Office of Oral Health;
- The findings and recommendations of the Office of Oral Health's Oral Cancer Programs; and
- Other related oral health issues.

The report includes the impact that Medicaid has seen on provider participation and utilization of dental care through implementation of the Medicaid adult dental expansion and other safety net programs.

Learn more about oral health accomplishments in Maryland

Updated OOH Guide Lists Public Health Dental Resources

Helps families, caregivers, and advocates find affordable dental care services



The Maryland Oral Health Resource Guide is produced by the Maryland Department of Health Office of Oral Health, to assist families, caregivers, and advocates in finding affordable public health dental care services in Maryland and in the immediate surrounding regions. The updated 2026 Oral Health Resource Guide is now available online.

The dental public health programs or facilities listed in the directory provide discounted, low-cost, and/ or special needs dental services. Information about other resources including the Maryland Healthy Smiles Program and programs in nearby Delaware and Washington, D.C. also are listed.

Access the 2026 Oral Health Resource Guide

The following article was submitted by the Maryland Department of Health Office of Oral Health.



February is National Children's Dental Health Month



February is National Children's Dental Health Month (NCDHM). Every February, dental organizations and providers throughout the nation take time to inform and educate the public about the importance of children's oral health. Recently the American Dental Association (ADA) announced that every day should be about children's dental health. This February, and every month, the ADA and OOH encourage you to promote children's dental health.

To help you raise awareness in your community, posters, activity sheets and a brushing calendar are available free of charge via the American Dental Association's [website](#).

Additional free resources are available via the Office of Oral Health's [website](#).

"Early childhood caries (ECC) is the most common chronic, preventable disease affecting children worldwide, with nearly half of United States children experiencing caries by adolescence. Left untreated, ECC can harm a child's health, development, and quality of life, but early prevention through diet, fluoride, and timely dental care can make a lasting difference."

Machado, Kristin Pratt. [Decisions in Dentistry](#). Quiz. Tiny Teeth, Big Impact. January 27, 2026

NEWS & RESOURCES

Children's Oral Health

[2022-2023 Children's Oral Health Survey](#)

[Editorial: Impact of overall health on oral health of children and adolescents](#)

[Children's Oral Health Care Use and Oral Health in United State After the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Enabling Factors and Oral Health Care Use Among Children Aged 0 through 5 years](#)

Chronic Disease

[Healthy Gums May Lead to Healthier Hearts](#)

[Periodontal Disease and Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease: A Scientific Statement](#)

RESOURCE: Provider Enrollment Flyer

To learn how Maryland dental providers can enroll in the Maryland Healthy Smiles Dental Program and resources provided, [review this enrollment flyer](#) and share with others!

RESOURCE: National Children's Oral Health Month

[From the American Heart Association](#)

Community Health Workers

[Medicaid Reimbursement for Community Health Workers Services: Model State Plan Amendment & Other Guidance](#)

Equity

[Why Black and Brown Patients Get Brushed Off When it Comes to Affordable Dental Care](#)

[Here's What Doc Appointments You Need to Make in 2026](#)

Fluoride

[Community Water Fluoridation Not Linked to Lower Birth Weight, Large US Study Finds](#)

[Fluoride at a Crossroads: What the EPA's New Review Means -- And Why It Matters](#)

[Community Water Fluoridation and Birth Outcomes](#)

[How Ending Water Fluoridation Would Affect Children and State Medicaid Costs](#)

Health Insurance

[Maryland Health Connection](#)

Maryland Healthy Smiles

[Maryland Healthy Smiles Dental Program](#)

Medicare

[Important Facts About Medicare and Oral/Dental Coverage](#)

Oral Health Integration

[NACHC and CareQuest Institute for Oral Health Partner to Promote](#)



AMERICA'S PEDIATRIC DENTISTS
THE BIG AUTHORITY on little teeth®

National Children's Dental Health Month

Simple Habits That Make a Difference

Tooth decay is the most common preventable chronic disease in children. The good news is that a few easy habits at home can help protect your child's teeth from the Mouth Monsters®.

-  Visit a pediatric dentist by a child's first birthday or within six months of their first tooth erupting.
-  Limit sugary snacks and drinks and encourage drinking water throughout the day.
-  Clean gums early, brush as soon as the first tooth appears, and use fluoridated toothpaste to help prevent cavities.

 **Why It Matters**
Regular dental visits and simple daily habits help prevent problems and build confidence in children when caring for their smiles.

Legislative Contacts

[U.S. Senators \(MD\)](#)

[U.S. Representatives \(MD\)](#)

[Maryland State Legislators](#)

Meetings/ Events/ Webinars

[American Dental Education Association Annual Session & Exhibition](#)
[Bridging Pathways Advancing Access](#)
[March 21-24, 2026](#)
[Montreal, Canada](#)

[National Oral Health Conference](#)
[Unveiling Oral Health Possibilities](#)
[April 13-15, 2026](#)
[Oklahoma City, Oklahoma](#)

[Academy Health 2026 Research Meeting](#)
[May 30-June 2, 2026](#)
[Seattle Convention Center](#)
[Seattle, WA](#)

[National Academy for State Health Policy](#)
[September 28-30, 2026](#)
[New York Hilton Midtown](#)
[New York, NY](#)

[Oral Health at Community Health Centers](#)

Rural Health

[MD Rural Health Strategic Plan 2025-2030](#)

[Rural Health Needs in America: Challenges and Solutions](#)

Veterans

[Veterans Need Affordable Dental Care](#)

[VA Community Care Network](#)

Workforce

[The Pathway Effect: A Guide to Strengthening the Oral Health Workforce Through Early Exposure Programs](#)

[Strengthening the Oral Health Workforce Through State Oral Health Improvement Plans](#)

[National Network for Oral Health Access Conference](#)
[October 25-28, 2026](#)
[Seattle, WA](#)



Join us! To become an MDAC member, [click here.](#)

CONTACT

Do you have events or announcements you'd like to share? Contact MDAC, and we'll make every effort to include them in our next newsletter, as space permits.

JOIN

MDAC is statewide coalition of clinical care providers, governments, non-profits, academic institutions, managed care organizations, foundations and associations working collaboratively to improve the health of all Marylanders through increased oral health promotion,

Contact MDAC

disease prevention, education, advocacy
and access to oral health care.

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Maryland Dental Action Coalition | 10015 Old Columbia Road Suite B-215 | Columbia, MD
21046 US

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