

**Testimony
Senate Bill No. 2231
Senate Human Services Committee
Senator Judy Lee, Chair
January 28, 2025**

Chair Lee, Vice Chair Weston and honorable members of the Senate Human Services Committee:

I am Kim Kuhlmann, the Policy and Partnership Manager in North Dakota for Community HealthCare Association of the Dakotas (CHAD) and with me today is my colleague Shannon Bacon, External Affairs Manager at CHAD, and Nadine Boe, CEO of Northland Community Health Centers. In my position at CHAD, I also facilitate the North Dakota Oral Health Coalition. On behalf of CHAD and our member health centers, I am here today in support of SB 2231, if amended to include dental treatment for adults covered by Medicaid Expansion.

CHAD is a non-profit membership organization that serves as the Primary Care Association for North Dakota and South Dakota, supporting community health centers across both states in their efforts to provide health care to underserved and low-income populations. The health centers we represent have locations in both urban and rural communities.

Community health centers (CHCs) are non-profit, community-driven primary care clinics that serve all individuals, regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay. The community health center integrated care model includes primary care, mental health and substance use treatment, dental care, pharmacy services, and a range of case management services that can include help with transportation, finding community resources, or assistance with insurance and financial enrollments.

North Dakota is home to five community health center organizations that provide comprehensive, integrated care to more than 36,000 individuals at 22 locations in 20 communities across the state. Sixteen percent of those patients are uninsured and over half earn incomes below the federal poverty level. Three health centers in North Dakota provide dental care at seven locations, with a new urgent dental clinic opening in Ray in February. Health centers served 11,912 dental patients with over 25,000 visits in 2023.

Currently, over 34,000 North Dakotans covered by Medicaid Expansion do not have dental coverage. This remains a significant gap in an otherwise strong North Dakotan approach to health coverage.

A Medicaid Benefit Strengthens the Dental Care System for Everyone

Adding a dental benefit for the Medicaid Expansion population brings more resources into

the health care system, and in the case of Medicaid expansion, 90 percent of those resources are federal. Let me share how the coverage numbers shape up for North Dakota health centers. Currently, around 40 percent of our patients are Medicaid beneficiaries, 13 percent are served by Medicare (which lacks dental coverage), 16 percent are uninsured, and 31 percent have private insurance coverage. When put together, that adds up nearly half of those we see lacking dental coverage. This makes it difficult to pay competitive wages and build our dental programs enough to meet community needs.

The North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services reports that only 44 percent of the need for dental providers across the state is being met. Given that we serve underserved populations and communities where there are likely to be even fewer providers than the state average, that gap looms large. Mara Jiran, CEO of Spectra Health, one of the state's community health centers, says, "Every week, hundreds of people attempt to schedule dental visits at our clinic. The demand far outweighs our current capacity. Incorporating oral health services into Medicaid Expansion would have an immediate impact at Spectra Health by creating sustainability in a challenging reimbursement model." She goes on to say, "It would reduce costly emergency visits by addressing oral health issues earlier while prioritizing cost-effective primary and preventative oral health care. This approach not only saves money but improves health outcomes. It offers the chance to expand our workforce, reduce administrative burden, and provide more sustainable care, benefiting both patients and the Medicaid program."

A Dental Benefit Would Improve Health Outcomes and Reduce Emergency Costs

For adults covered by Medicaid Expansion, adding coverage for dental care will improve their lives. Individuals who report dental care affordability concerns miss more hours of work for unplanned dental care. Better oral health results in better overall health outcomes, improves productivity, and leads to better quality of life.

We know that oral health impacts overall health and poor oral health is associated with many other serious health conditions including diabetes, heart disease, stroke, dementia, cancers, and respiratory infections to name a few. By making access to oral health care a priority for every North Dakotan, we can improve the overall health of our citizens.

According to the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services, our state has seen a significant rise in the number of emergency room and urgent care clinic visits related to tooth pain over the last 5 years. In our "Dental Coverage for Medicaid Expansion Beneficiaries" two-pager, you can see that from 2020 to 2024, the number of tooth pain related visits, including visits to emergency rooms, primary care clinics, and urgent care, increased from 2,625 to 4,715, nearly doubling in just 5 years. These oral health related emergencies are costing the healthcare system, the Medicaid program, and patients additional money in emergency visits. And they don't even include the additional costs of the complications for patients with heart disease and diabetes that is caused by poor oral



Community HealthCare Association of the Dakotas

health. Adding dental treatment to Medicaid Expansion is one way to help reduce the costs for emergency dental care and for other health complications related to lack of access to preventive dental care.

In conclusion, a dental benefit in Medicaid expansion would strengthen an oral health system in which we are facing a real crisis in access to care and it would improve the health and lives of those who receive the coverage. It is a way to devote resources to low-cost preventive care rather than high-cost responses to more serious health conditions. I ask for your support on behalf of our member health centers to amend and recommend a do pass on SB 2231 to include dental treatment for adults on Medicaid Expansion.

I am happy to answer any questions you have. Thank you!

Kim Kuhlmann
Policy and Partnership Manager, ND
Community HealthCare Association of the Dakotas (CHAD)