



Statement for the Record of the

Delta Dental Institute

to the

United States Senate Finance Committee  
Subcommittee on Health Care  
Senator Benjamin Cardin, Chair  
Senator Steve Daines, Ranking Member

on

***An oral health crisis: identifying and addressing health disparities***

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On behalf of the [Delta Dental Institute](#), thank you Chairman Cardin and Ranking Member Daines for the opportunity to share insights following last week's hearing: "An Oral Health Crisis: Identifying and Addressing Health Disparities." We applaud you for holding a hearing to discuss this important issue and appreciate your willingness to allow additional stakeholders to submit statements for the record.

My name is Vivian Vasallo, executive director of the Delta Dental Institute. In this role, I head Delta Dental's work to elevate oral health in the nation's broader health care conversation through research, community engagement, and advocacy. In partnership with Delta Dental companies, we strive to ensure that everyone understands the importance of oral health to overall health and has access to the high-quality dental care they need.

### **Oral Health is integral to overall health**

In 2000, the U.S. Surgeon General released a [report](#) on oral health characterizing oral disease as a "silent epidemic" affecting vulnerable populations, including historically underrepresented groups, people with disabilities, and the elderly. Even 20 years later, [research](#) shows that rates of tooth decay, periodontal disease, and oral cancers are far higher — and dental care utilization rates considerably lower — for historically underrepresented groups in the U.S. To adequately address disparities in oral health care, the Delta Dental Institute recommends the subcommittee focus on efforts to increase access to care, improve oral health literacy, and create a more diverse oral health workforce.

Oral health is critical to overall health, and poor oral health can have dangerous consequences. Oral disease is associated with [cardiovascular disease](#), [respiratory disease](#) and [adverse pregnancy outcomes](#). Periodontal, or gum, disease is strongly associated with [increased risk of cancer](#) and chronic diseases such as [diabetes](#). Untreated, often preventable, oral diseases send [2.1 million Americans](#) to the emergency room each year.

A [poll](#) from the Delta Dental Institute shows Americans overwhelmingly agree that oral health is critical to overall health. In fact, [more than two-thirds](#) agree the benefits of a routine dentist appointment during COVID-19 outweighed the potential risks of delaying preventive care. Yet there is a lot of work left to do to ensure all Americans have affordable access to the oral health care they need. [Millions](#) of Americans lack dental insurance, and racial inequities have created [stark gaps](#) in oral health outcomes for communities of color.

### **Prioritizing oral health**

Americans want the federal government to take action to expand oral health access and affordability. Another Delta Dental Institute [poll](#) found clear bipartisan support for improved access to oral health care, with 93% of Democrats and 80% of Republicans in support of dental coverage in Medicare, and 86% of Democrats and 66% of Republicans supporting state-based Medicaid coverage for oral health.

In addition to prioritizing oral health care access, to address oral health disparities and ensure the effectiveness of executive, legislative, or regulatory action related to oral health care, America needs more oral health experts in the federal government, including agencies like

[HRSA](#), the [CDC](#), and the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#), which have a substantial impact on Americans' oral health, but few have a chief dental officer or equivalent on staff. We [commend](#) the Biden Administration and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure for prioritizing oral health with their appointment of Dr. Natalia Chalmers as Chief Dental Officer, but there is still much work to be done.

### **Oral health literacy**

Oral health literacy plays a critical role in driving health outcomes by enabling patients to make informed decisions about their care. In a Delta Dental Institute white paper, "[Improving America's Oral Health Literacy](#)," the authors found that while the public recognized the connection between oral and overall health, discrepancies in oral health outcomes remain, due in part to low levels of oral health literacy. Though survey results from a Delta Dental Institute [poll](#) found that most Americans feel generally positive about their ability to understand health information, there are gaps for low-income, aging, and rural communities that are important for all stakeholders, including dental health professionals, insurers, health funders, employers, and others, to address.

We [applaud](#) the bipartisan introduction of the Oral Health Literacy Act ([H.R.994](#), [S.403](#)), which would authorize a public education campaign across all relevant federal programs to increase oral health literacy and awareness. We believe this legislation will help create more equitable policies and initiatives for oral health and improve access to care. As such, we urge quick action in Congress to help close the oral health literacy gap.

### **Diversity in the oral health workforce**

While racial and ethnic diversity among health professionals is [linked](#) to improved outcomes and greater health equity, the current oral health workforce does not reflect the changing demographics of the U.S. population.

To help address this imbalance, on World Oral Health Day, March 20, 2023, Delta Dental launched the [Driving Greater Diversity in the Oral Health Workforce Campaign](#) which will support workforce diversity initiatives through oral health education, literacy, research, and community investment, and by establishing the industry-leading [Delta Dental Oral Health Diversity Fund](#). In its first year, the Delta Dental Oral Health Diversity Fund will make targeted investments of up to \$1 million to support innovative solutions and address barriers that school-aged children from historically underrepresented communities face in pursuing careers in the oral health professions.

In addition, recent [research](#) from the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, sponsored by the Delta Dental Institute, found that expanding the dental workforce in Oral Health Professional Shortage Areas through the National Health Service Corps would reduce the risk of dental caries among children in underserved areas, improve care, and cut costs.

To further address oral health disparities, Delta Dental is committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion and addressing the needs of diverse communities through research, giving initiatives, and other activities in the communities we serve. In [2021](#), Delta Dental made

key investments totaling \$106 million, nearly a quarter of which were dedicated to oral health education and workforce development. As part of this giving, Delta Dental has made efforts to expand access to care by supporting dental treatment and prevention programs, such as free dental clinics; advancing health equity through scholarships and grants for underrepresented students pursuing careers in oral health; and funding research and supporting new care models and technologies, like medical-dental integration and teledentistry, to help develop new solutions to improve care.

### **Subcommittee actions to reduce oral health disparities**

Based on the [state of oral health in America](#), there is a clear link between oral health and overall health and a need to address barriers that vulnerable patients face in accessing high-quality oral health care. We commend the Subcommittee's hearing on this topic, as it brought these very matters to light. Our *Driving Greater Diversity in the Oral Health Workforce* campaign was created in hopes of diversifying the oral health workforce and subsequently improving oral health outcomes for racially and ethnically diverse patients and communities. We believe the country would benefit from programs like our campaign, and the Subcommittee's recognition of disparities in oral health care and the lack of diversity in the oral health workforce would make way for these very programs to develop and grow.

Our aim is to create an oral health workforce that is racially and ethnically diverse, culturally competent, and reflects the changing demographics of the U.S. population. To accomplish this, we recommend that members of the Subcommittee create legislation that authorizes a federal program to create a more diverse and culturally competent dental workforce, following the framing of what Delta Dental is trying to accomplish through our ongoing campaign.

### **Conclusion**

Chairman Cardin and Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for holding a hearing on this critically important topic. I hope we are able to continue this conversation in the coming months, as significant work remains to address oral health disparities. We were pleased to see Dr. Cherae M. Farmer-Dixon, Dean of Meharry Medical College's School of Dentistry, one of only two historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) dental schools in the U.S., on the panel. There are additional experts with diverse backgrounds and robust experience addressing oral health disparities in their communities from whom the committee can continue to learn.

As the nation's oral health leader, serving more than 85 million Americans and offering the largest network of dentists in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, Delta Dental is eager to lend its expertise in oral health to inform future legislative initiatives. As issues in this important policy area arise, we welcome the opportunity to work with you to move those policies forward. Please consider the Delta Dental Institute as a key resource and do not hesitate to contact us should you have any questions.