Liliana’s Story

Liliana is a 48 year old mother of three children who has health coverage through AHCCCS. Had she been able to see a dentist when she first fractured a tooth, it could have been an easy and affordable fix.

Instead, an infection took root that left her feverish and dangerously ill for weeks, causing her to miss work and lose income. The tooth had to be removed by an oral surgeon, at a hefty expense to Liliana.

Someday when she has dental insurance, Liliana hopes she will be able to afford a replacement tooth. Until then, she’ll live with constant pain when she eats, embarrassment when she smiles, and fear knowing that if the infection returns, she’ll have few options for affordable treatment.

The Case for AHCCCS Adult Dental Coverage

Over 99% of Arizonans say oral health is important to them, yet many face significant obstacles to care. Individuals without dental coverage experience a disproportionate share of oral disease. Untreated oral disease increases risk of cardiovascular disease, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, poor diabetes control, and other conditions, including mental illness. (1,2)

At present, over one million adults over age 21 who participate in AHCCCS do not have a dental benefit for preventative dental services. AHCCCS oral health benefits are reserved for emergencies and capped at $1,000, with very few exceptions.

Untreated dental problems have devastating impacts on the individual—as in Liliana’s case (see story)—and widespread untreated dental problems put unnecessary strain on state resources. In 2014 alone, there were 27,000 visits to hospital emergency departments in Arizona for preventable dental conditions; AHCCCS paid for 65% of these visits. Between 2009 and 2011, emergency room costs associated with untreated dental problems cost the state over $31 million. Recent research has shown offering an adult dental benefit may reduce the use of hospital emergency departments by 14%. (3,4)

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** An AHCCCS adult dental benefit would allow all Arizonans to access vital dental services, and would save the state money by preventing costly health complications caused by or exacerbated by poor oral health.

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**QUICK FACTS**

1 IN 3 OLDER ADULTS (65+) ARE MISSING 6 OR MORE TEETH

1 IN 4 LOW-INCOME ADULTS REPORT HAVING POOR ORAL HEALTH

78% OF LOW-INCOME ARIZONANS CITE COST AS THE BIGGEST BARRIER TO ACCESSING DENTAL CARE {1}
The Case for AHCCCS Pregnant People Dental Benefit

Pregnant people are especially vulnerable to oral disease, due to hormonal changes during pregnancy, which can have lasting impacts on their children and families. This grave issue is pronounced for low-income people, who are more likely to lack access to critical health and nutrition supports. Pregnant people with health coverage through AHCCCS do not have a dental benefit for their oral health care needs, despite broad support by the state legislature.

Research suggests a link between gum disease and poor birth outcomes, including maternal high blood pressure, preterm delivery, and lower birth weight infants. These complications increase overall health care costs. (5)

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** An AHCCCS pregnant people benefit would help ensure Arizona’s parents and babies are healthy, and help the state cut costs associated with complications due to poor oral health of expectant individuals.

AZOHC is a dedicated cadre of oral health advocates, comprising a large cross section of health professionals, community leaders, policy makers, and grassroots organizers. We exist to create meaningful discussions and impactful change to address oral health disparities in Arizona.

**Contact:** azohc.org or azohcoalition@gmail.com

**REFERENCES:**
1. AZ Department of Health Services - Oral Health State Plan
2. Delta Dental - AZ Oral Health Needs Assessment
4. Elani et al. (2020) - Changes in emergency department dental visits after Medicaid expansion
5. Mohan et al. (2018) - A case for Medicaid dental coverage for pregnant women
6. CDC.gov - Pregnancy and Dental Cavities