

1 decision left pregnant mothers without dental care

Advocates seek return of coverage under AHCCCS

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When Stephanie Parham was a 20-year-old mom, determined to protect her daughter Angelica from the kind of tough childhood she had endured, state health insurance for low-income families helped keep them healthy.

Parham, whose braces went uncared for as a homeless teen, needed dental repairs for damage that had worsened after giving birth. Women who become pregnant often face dental problems because of rapid hormone changes, health experts say.

After Parham turned 21, however, the state health care program cut off her dental benefits.

Eliminating dental plans for the roughly 1 million adults over 21 who receive coverage through the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System was a cost-saving measure taken by the Arizona Legislature during the Great Recession. The decision more than a decade ago has marked Parham's life.

Unable to afford the needed dental work, Parham often avoided getting care until the pain was unbearable, she said. She once had a tooth extracted in the ER and other times drove to Mexico for cheap, but sometimes inferior, treatment.

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Stephanie Parham, right, stands with her daughter, Angelica Del Rincon, 14, outside their home in Phoenix on March 11. At age 21, Parham lost dental coverage through her state health insurance program.
THOMAS HAWTHORNE/
THE REPUBLIC

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Dental care

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Now, at 35, Parham is continuing to deal with the damage and is fundraising thousands of dollars to pay for implants to replace her missing teeth.

"Had my (Medicaid) dental insurance not been cut off, I would not be here right now," Parham said. "I would have felt blessed and thankful to have that coverage. I would have wanted to get my teeth done. (Instead) it was so expensive, I got discouraged."

The Arizona Legislature since 2017 has considered proposals to restore routine teeth cleanings and dental care for pregnant mothers.

But every year, the bills fail. The opposition is largely about cost.

Political leaders' decision to yank AHCCCS dental coverage and not fully restore it, including when the state's budget has a surplus, frustrates Parham.

"That decision affected me," she said. "That's really upsetting. That really hurts me."

Campaign to restore dental benefits for pregnant women

A bipartisan coalition of lawmakers, health advocates and charities have pushed to bring back dental benefits for poor Arizonans.

Lawmakers agreed in 2017 to reimburse \$1,000 per adult covered by Arizona's Medicaid program for emergency procedures such as root canals and oral surgery. But the benefit doesn't apply to regular exams or fillings, and many emergency procedures cost more than \$1,000.

Advocates have called since then for the state to restore routine dental care for pregnant mothers.

The good it would do women and babies would be enormous, according to Jessie Armendt, who represents March of Dimes, a non-profit founded in 1938 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to fight polio that now promotes maternal and child health.

One striking finding in medical research is that pregnant mothers with gum disease are more likely to give birth prematurely, have babies with low birth weight and can even transmit harmful bacteria to their infants, according to The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing.

Regular teeth cleanings can reduce

those risks.

"When you look at oral health care across the board, it's so cheap to provide that preventative care, and it can have such a huge impact on a patient's health," Armendt said. "We would love to prevent all pre-term births statewide, but even if we can just make a real dent in it, you recoup the dollars you spend pretty quickly."

Rep. Kelli Butler, D-Paradise Valley, who owns a dental practice, has teamed with Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature to advocate for change.

But even though the bills to provide dental care to poor pregnant women frequently draw hundreds of supporters from the public compared with a handful of opponents, the legislation never gets far, Butler said.

"It is absolutely baffling we are not prioritizing this," Butler said. "I don't understand why we wouldn't view the health of your mouth the same as the health of other parts of your body. ... It makes moral and fiscal sense to provide this benefit for pregnant women."

Opposition from GOP legislative leaders isn't clear but appears to center on cost, she said. AHCCCS estimated the state might pay about \$4.1 million to extend dental benefits to low-income moms in a year.

But with thousands of pre-term births in Arizona and neonatal intensive care costs as high as \$25,000 per preemie, Armendt said, preventing even a fraction of early births through Medicaid dental benefits could offset the state's expenses several times over.

Concern about cost

Rep. Regina Cobb, R-Kingman, a former dentist, has helped to co-sponsor the bills.

Pregnant women experience more changes in their oral tissue than at any other time of their life, she said.

"You've got to have a healthy mom to have a healthy baby," Cobb said.

Although she said many lawmakers believe in the value of dental care for pregnant women, some have questions because the cost estimates have fluctuated and the number of women who could be helped has been unclear, she said.

One concern this year was that the bill did not include a price tag limit, Cobb said.

Previous bills capped the coverage of routine dental care for a pregnant woman at \$1,000.

The total estimated cost per year for

The number of uninsured Arizonans going to hospitals for dental emergencies is so great, Delta Dental of Arizona announced in January it would donate \$525,000 to divert patients from HonorHealth emergency rooms to community dentists.

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the dental appointments is actually fairly low, around \$470,000, according to AHCCCS budget staff.

The bulk of the cost comes from the possibility that hundreds, or even thousands, of women who were not previously seeking prenatal care under the Medicaid system or who had not yet notified the state that they were pregnant might jump at the chance for dental care, budget staffers told lawmakers.

If that happened, the state would have to pay for more members. The state also could lose money, because the federal government reimburses care at a lower rate for pregnant women than non-pregnant women.

Some lawmakers questioned the likelihood that so many pregnant women who were not already attending visits with a doctor would see a dentist. But budget staff said it was possible.

Others pointed out that it would be positive if dental benefits encouraged pregnant women to seek health care before their births.

Although the bill is probably dead this year, it might succeed next year, Cobb said.

"Let's get the price tag down," she said.

An overwhelming need

Ideally, Arizona would reinstate dental care for all low-income adults, advocates say.

Missing, broken or unclear teeth can damage people's ability to land good jobs, eat healthily, care for other health conditions and maintain confidence and relationships, among other negative effects, said Dr. Ken Snyder, executive dental director of St. Vincent de Paul's free dental clinic.

"The impact it (dental care) has on people can be life changing," Snyder said. "What we're really doing is giving them hope about a brighter future."

The demand for affordable dental care in Arizona is huge, he said. Even when St. Vincent de Paul doubled the size of its dental clinic in 2019, it saw nearly 2,000 patients that year and still had a waiting list.

Hundreds of Phoenix-area residents regularly camp overnight for free care during Dental Mission of Mercy events at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

Midwestern University in Glendale, whose student dentists provide low-cost dental care to the public, see about 15,500 patients per year.

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Lawmakers 'don't live it'

Dental care should be considered just as important as other medical care, Parham said.

Parham said she wants to use her personal experience as a low-income pregnant mom whose dental benefits were essential to convince lawmakers at the Capitol to approve the legislation.

"They don't live it. They're sitting there comfortable," Parham said. "I will take to the streets. We will march up there."

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