

**Alaska Commission on Aging
KEY POINTS TO KNOW ABOUT:**

**Continuation of the Medicaid Adult Dental Program
February 2009**

Issue:

The Alaska Commission on Aging was a strong proponent of the original 2006 legislation which added preventive and restorative dental care to the palette of services available to adult Medicaid recipients. At the time, we realized that many low-income seniors were living with a variety of painful, destructive dental problems because they could not afford to pay for routine dental exams or dentures.

Prior to implementation of this program in 2006, dental services for Medicaid recipients were limited to expensive emergency care for relief of pain and acute infection only – often leading to extraction of permanent teeth. Waiting for dental emergencies resulted in more expensive dental care and limited the dentist's ability to address problems that would result in future dental emergencies.

While much of the focus on tooth decay concentrates on children, adults remain at high risk for dental decay, especially elderly and other adults on certain medications or undergoing cancer treatments that decrease saliva output. Studies have also shown the link between oral health and chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. For seniors, the inability to properly chew food due to poor dentition leads to chronic malnutrition and its many consequences for health. Furthermore, those with ill-fitting dentures, missing teeth, no dentures, and other disfiguring dental problems may avoid the social engagement that is so essential to maintaining mental and physical health for seniors.

Program statistics for the period April 1, 2007 through September 30, 2008 indicate the following:

- ◆ Approximately 1,800 seniors were served by this program, comprising 19.4 percent of all those served.
- ◆ Approximately 900 seniors received dentures under the program, 38.6 percent of the total persons who received dentures.
- ◆ Expenses for seniors totaled 24.6 percent of program expenses.
- ◆ The average cost for care provided to a senior on the program was \$855.

Recommendation:

Re-authorize the Medicaid Adult Dental Program. Continue this beneficial program, which supports the health of low-income seniors and others.