

April 11, 2025

Ways & Means Chair Robinson, Appropriations Chair Ormsby and budget leaders:

The 17 undersigned organizations are writing to urge continued prioritization of dental care access in the final biennial operating budget. Specifically, please preserve current funding levels for both the children's and adult Apple Health (Medicaid) dental programs and continue the DentistLink public/private partnership.

As you know, oral health is integral to overall health and wellbeing. Access to routine dental care prevents small problems from becoming more serious and more costly. Untreated oral disease is connected to diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Children with painful untreated cavities can struggle to pay attention in school. More than a quarter of low-income adults in Washington report that the condition of their smile has negatively impacted their ability to interview for a job. Older adults who are missing teeth can struggle to maintain nutritious diets.

We recognize that the state is facing a very challenging budget environment, and legislators have difficult decisions to make. **We thank budget writers in both chambers for maintaining our state's comprehensive Apple Health adult dental benefit.** Continued investment in the adult benefit is essential for building a sustainable program that dental providers and patients can rely on. We know from past experience that cutting the benefit leads to worse and more expensive health outcomes for enrollees.

However, the House and Senate operating budgets take different approaches to funding levels for the Apple Health dental program. While the Senate budget maintains the current funding levels for both the children's and adult Apple Health dental programs, the House budget includes cuts in provider reimbursement rates for both adults and children. **We thank Senate budget writers for proposing zero cuts to the Apple Health dental program and urge House budget writers to move to the Senate funding level in the final operating budget.**

We are very concerned about the Apple Health dental cuts in the House budget, which will surely result in reduced access to care for Medicaid-insured children and adults. Apple Health provides dental coverage for nearly two million Washington residents. Investments in the pediatric and adult rates in recent sessions were important components of a long-term strategy to increase access. With only about 50% of kids and 20% of adults covered by Apple Health seeing a dentist each year, we cannot afford to go backward. Cutting the reimbursement rates now, which are still far lower than commercial reimbursement rates, will only further stress the Apple Health provider network and leave more Apple Health enrollees without the access to the care they need to be healthy.

Finally, we thank Senate budget writers for including funding for the DentistLink public/private partnership and urge inclusion of this funding in the final budget. DentistLink is a free dental referral service connecting Washingtonians with Apple Health or no insurance to dental care in their communities. Initially a project of Arcora Foundation, DentistLink has been a public/private partnership between Arcora and the Health Care Authority since FY2022. DentistLink is serving more low-income residents each year (more than 90,000 in 2024), and yet there is still so much need. Continued state investment will enable DentistLink to continue to scale up to serve more Washingtonians facing the biggest barriers to routine dental care. State funding will be matched by

more than \$1.6M in private funds from Arcora Foundation. **We ask budget writers to move to the Senate position of \$100,000 GF-S for DentistLink in the final budget.**

We know you face difficult decisions as you negotiate a final biennial operating budget. However, we cannot afford to balance the budget at the expense of Apple Health enrollees' oral health. Please continue to preserve the Apple Health adult dental benefit, and maintain the Senate position on Apple Health dental program funding and DentistLink funding in the final 2025-2027 operating budget.

Thank you for your consideration and for your work on behalf of Washington families.

Signed,

AARP Washington State
Arcora Foundation
Better Health Together
Children's Alliance
Foundation for Healthy Generations
Lindquist Dental Clinic for Children
Northwest Health Law Advocates
Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences - School of Dental Medicine
Project Access Northwest
Statewide Poverty Action Network
UW School of Dentistry
Washington Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics
Washington Dental Hygienists' Association
Washington Denturist Association
Washington Healthcare Access Alliance
Washington State Dental Association
Washington State Oral Health Coalition