



**Testimony:
Athena Haniotis
Client
Health Care for the Homeless**

Before the

Maryland Senate: Committee on Finance

on

SB 284: Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Dental Coverage for Adults

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Miller Senate Office Building, 3 East Wing
Annapolis, Maryland

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for your time.

My name is Athena Haniotis, and I am a disabled resident of Anne Arundel County, Maryland. I travel to Baltimore City to receive care and services at Health Care for the Homeless.

Writing and sharing my experience, I find myself overcome with emotions. Fear, worry, and anger. That is because besides it being an everyday concern for me, it feels like my cumulative experience was just yesterday. Growing up here in Maryland, my family (which consisted of my single parent mother and myself) was too impoverished to go to a regular doctor, let alone a dentist. It was considered a "luxury" that we just could not afford, especially on a regular basis. When I grew up and finally got a great job, it came with the opportunity to get dental coverage. Having being told that it wasn't needed my entire youth, I found it disturbing as an adult how direly important it is to have access to and use dental and oral hygiene care.

My first real dental appointment did not go so well. I had extreme anxiety, and was trembling, crying, and my nails were digging indentations into the chair's padded armrests. At the end of the appointment, the dentist and his assistant concluded and suggested that I take an anti-anxiety medication prior to any dental appointments or procedures in the future. I lost coverage and when I was able to get coverage again, I was in extreme pain. I was shocked to learn just how bad my dental health had deteriorated. I needed to have all of my wisdom teeth removed, as they were either sideways pushing on other teeth or impacted under bone. That meant that they needed to be surgically removed. I had numerous fillings that needed to be done. I also needed at least 1 or 2 root canals and crowns, where I was told that I had periodontal disease, among needing many other treatments. I ended up being treated by 3-4 different dental health providers (dentists, periodontal specialists, and surgeons). Thankfully, I had dental coverage at that time which covered some of the cost, but I still couldn't afford to get everything completed. In total, I was looking at well over \$10,000 worth of dental work to be completed. So I got treated what I could afford & let everything else go by the wayside.

Not long after setting up a treatment plan, my health had spiraled downwards & I lost my job with the State of Maryland, and also all of my health & dental coverage. If I wanted to continue all of my same benefits, between COBRA & dental, I was looking at almost \$1200-\$1500. I couldn't even afford rent & food, never mind health & dental coverage. Within 2-3 months, I ended up becoming homeless.

Eventually I became a client at Health Care for The Homeless. They are one of the very few programs that even offer dental services. And because they see so many patients & have limited staff, there was a long wait for an appointment. I resorted to my old stance of "Well, it's not THAT important". Even though for me, having good strong dental health is a necessity. I had had stomach surgery that left me with numerous severe complications and I needed my teeth to help me break down my food before it reached my stomach. I ended up breaking one of my back teeth. It was excruciating pain. At first I couldn't get in for dental services but the pain continued to get worse. In the middle of the night, my friend found me rolled in a ball with my face on the floor. I felt like I wanted to put my jaw through the floor or rip it from my face. The throbbing felt like a jackhammer right on a nerve. I went to Health Care for the Homeless first thing in the morning as an emergency walk-in patient. I was one of the lucky ones that I was able to be seen later that day to have it removed.

Since that day, I have had to have 2 more emergency removals, all of which are back teeth that I desperately need for nutrition to help break down my food. The need for emergency dental services are

so great that I have yet to work on any of my other dental issues. This is not okay. I should not have to wait for an emergency to pop up & have it get so bad that I need to have my teeth removed.

People only get one set of adult teeth. Besides for aesthetic purposes, where having damaged teeth can actually not only affect mental & emotional health & self-image, but can also affect how people see & treat you, but you also need your only set of teeth for nutritional purposes, especially in my case. Thank you.