



**Testimony:
Shannon Lake, CDA
Dental Assistant
Health Care for the Homeless**

before the

Maryland Senate: Committee on Finance

on

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

February 7, 2018
Miller Senate Office Building, 3 East Wing
Annapolis, Maryland

My name is Shannon Lake, and **I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 284** to create an adult Medicaid benefit in Maryland.

For the last three years, I have worked as a dental assistant at **Health Care for the Homeless**, a federally qualified health center that serves 10,000 individuals a year across multiple clinical sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County and Harford counties.

Every day, my team and I see the damaging effects of a health care system that denies dental coverage to some of our community's most vulnerable members: adults experiencing homelessness. Many of our clients have gone their entire adult lives without dental care, and the results are devastating. In fact, **people experiencing homelessness report dental care as their most common unmet health need¹**.

Tooth decay left untreated can turn into infections, and infections in the body can lead to a range of serious health complications. Because our oral health affects what and how we eat, many of our clients experience digestive issues, worsening diabetes and weight loss. Oral disease is also associated with increased risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease. The stigmas associated with poor dental health lead to **social isolation, unemployment and even homelessness itself**. Without access to dental care, my clients are unable to get their lives back on track.

We recently treated a woman who was living in a shelter and missing many of her teeth. She was ambitious and hardworking, but the pain and embarrassment that come with a life without dental care left her defeated. She had a hard time speaking and chewing food, and although she was actively looking for a job, she felt too insecure to attend any interviews.

Through the dental program at Health Care for the Homeless, she eventually received dentures. The first time she saw herself in the mirror with her new teeth, she cried tears of joy. "You don't know how much you've changed my life," she told us. Not long after, she landed a job working the front desk at a local Baltimore law firm. Now, she is housed and healthy.

<i>Dental services at Health Care for the Homeless</i>			
	Unique Clients	Total Visits	Annual Increase
2012	469	1,300	--
2013	714	1,800	52% more clients; 32% more visits
2014	818	2,170	15% more clients; 21% more visits
2015	977	2,564	19% more clients; 18% more visits
2016	1,276	4,401	31% more clients; 72% more visits
2017	1,421	4,383	11% more clients; 0.4% less visits

I am proud to work at Health Care for the Homeless and help change so many lives. In the past two years, we've tripled our dental care capacity to meet tremendous unmet dental need. We now have four fulltime dentists: two at our downtown clinic, one down the street at Our Daily Bread and one in our West Baltimore clinic. And this expansion, in turn, has allowed us to increase the number of dental clients we care for by 50%: from 977 in 2015 to 1,421 in 2017.

At Health Care for the Homeless, we are steadily and deliberately growing our dental program. Each advance is supported by a combination of public

¹ Baggett, T.P. O'Connell, J.J., Singer, D.E., Rigotti, N.A. (2010). The unmet health care needs of homeless adults: A national study. *American Journal of Public Health* (1007): 1326-1333.

and private partners who share our commitment to dental care as an important element of comprehensive health care.

At the same time, we recognize that the lack of dental benefits to Medicaid recipients presents a significant barrier to sustaining this work. In 2017, insurance covered less than 4% (\$52,000) of the \$1.37 million dollar program at Health Care for the Homeless. Nearly half the funding deficit was raised through private philanthropy (\$650,000+). The agency allocated operating funds granted through the Human Resources Services Administration to offset the remainder. This year, we project a funding gap of \$1,500,000 after factoring in billing.

If the state were to allocate Medicaid funds for some adult dental care, our clinic—and many more like it—would be able to help thousands of people attain the basic level of oral health they need and deserve. Please support SB 284. Thank you.

Shannon Lake, CDA

Dental Assistant, **Health Care for the Homeless**