

# The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association

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Volume 104 | Number 3

Article 6

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3-1-2022

## The Governor's Budget Awareness for Dentistry

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### Recommended Citation

Smiley, Christopher J. DDS (2022) "The Governor's Budget Awareness for Dentistry," *The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association*: Vol. 104: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation/vol104/iss3/6>

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By Christopher J. Smiley DDS  
Editor-in-Chief

# The Governor's Budget Awareness for Dentistry

**G**ov. Gretchen Whitmer presented her proposed budget in early February, and it was a big step forward for the awareness of the importance of Michigan's oral health.

I say "awareness" because dentistry is often an afterthought in this process, and nothing is guaranteed to happen until a budget passes the legislative process and is signed into law.

I say "a big step forward" because many oral health initiatives now slated for funding have been on the Michigan Dental Association's wish list for a long time. We've lobbied for their inclusion in the past, only to see them displaced by other state priorities once the final budget is approved.

Traditionally, priorities such as roads, bridges, and school funding take precedence. However, this is an election year when many popular issues receive attention, and Michigan has more money available to address its many needs. The state treasury has billions of dollars from federal COVID-19 recovery funds, along with a boost in sales and income tax revenue realized during the pandemic. The governor has taken this opportunity to propose more — a lot more — in a \$74 billion budget that includes funding to improve oral health for the people of Michigan.

The MDA's wish list includes funding to remove barriers to access to hospital-based dental care. The proposed budget addresses a significant hurdle by providing \$1.2 million to increase payments to facilities and anesthesia providers for dental care under general anesthesia. Access to federal funding will leverage the total amount to \$4.3 million.

Additionally, our legislative agenda has long championed appropriate funding of adult dental Medicaid coverage to provide access to care for the underserved. The proposed budget sets aside \$68.7 million in state funds, supplemented by federal funds, to leverage the total to \$243 million to provide this long-absent coverage.

The governor's proposal combines the current fee-

for-service Medicaid coverage, Healthy Michigan Plan dental coverage, and Healthy Kids Dental Plan into one managed care contract. The plan design remains to be understood, but the MDA has learned that the successful Healthy Kids dental program, with an existing network and enhanced fee allowances, will be the model for the new plan design.

Politicians recognize that workforce availability is a critical issue our state must address. Businesses large and small are finding it challenging to hire workers. Every sector of the economy is impacted. Even restaurants and retail stores have curtailed hours of operation and are offering signing bonuses to attract applicants to fill job openings.

Through advocacy with legislators, employers, and the public, the MDA has shown that painful teeth make it difficult to focus at work, and directly impact employability. The lack of a presentable smile is also a barrier for individuals to have the confidence to seek employment, further limiting workforce availability.

Oral health is an essential tool to reduce higher health care costs, and it is good for businesses, big and small, to support workforce availability. Access to dental care for Michigan's adult underserved population is a long-term unmet need. Just as we saw with the success of the expansion of children's dental coverage in Michigan, providing coverage will create access for adults to get the care they need, and that's also good for the business of dentistry.

Funding availability and the pressing need to address workforce shortages have combined to set the governor's budget agenda. Effective MDA advocacy has prominently positioned dentistry in that budget. The significance of the awareness resulting from having these initiatives presented in that budget is an outstanding achievement, and it will create future opportunities. However, getting this far is no guarantee, and each of us must participate when called upon by the MDA to lend our voices in lobbying efforts if any of this is to become a reality. ●