

The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association

Volume 104 | Number 2

Article 4

2-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Katibai, Neema JD (2022) "Advocacy Spotlight: ADA Lobbyist Conference Highlights Critical Advocacy Issues," *The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association*: Vol. 104: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation/vol104/iss2/4>

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ADA Lobbyist Conference Highlights Critical Advocacy Issues



By Neema Katibai, JD
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In December I was privileged to attend the ADA Lobbyist Conference and have the chance to discuss with other state legislative leaders and staff many of the issues dentistry is facing, both nationally and closer to home. It was a most valuable experience to connect with other state dental association government affairs teams and to represent the MDA throughout the conference.

The agenda covered a broad variety of issues impacting dentistry. These included insurance and Medicare reform, teledentistry, the impact of technology on patient care, student debt, and workforce issues related to ensuring an adequate supply of dental team members. Throughout the conference, panelists led discussions on building partnerships with other organizations to achieve our mutual advocacy goals.

Medicare reform was a hot topic. With Medicare reform being prioritized by the Biden administration in 2021, the ADA has been engaged in discussions with legislators to discuss the future of dental benefits under Medicare, and the reasons why the ADA opposed inclusion of dental benefits under Plan B. The ADA emphasized the impact that grassroots outreach had on its conversations with legislators, who received more than 60,000 emails from dentists across the country. That's a lot of emails, and it demonstrates that constituent engagement is an important advocacy tool. Additionally, ongoing engagement provides opportunities for legislators to understand the positions for which associations are advocating.

Although Medicare reform took the spotlight as one of the most visible federal issues of 2021, state dental associations have also been working on Medicaid reform in order to address insufficient fee schedules. As we all know, these insufficient fee schedules disincentivize providers from participating, and create barriers to care for vulnerable populations. In Michigan, this issue has manifested in the growing backlog of patients — primarily young children, patients with special needs, and other vulnerable populations — who are unable to access den-

tal care because their benefits are insufficient to secure necessary operating room and anesthesiologist access.

A common factor across all the states that have been successful in advocacy is participation by dentists who are able to share first-hand stories demonstrating the needs for reforms. There is nothing like a personal example from a constituent to help a legislator understand an issue. Using personal storytelling to address barriers to dental care for vulnerable populations in Michigan will be a focus for the MDA this year.

Another top issue was teledentistry. One of the MDA's top priorities for 2022 is to develop a legislative proposal that addresses the demand for teledentistry by considering the differences between medical and dental billing practices, prioritizing patient safety and privacy, and ensuring dentists are able to deliver care effectively. Nationally, teledentistry legislation has been passed in several states, using different approaches with varying levels of success. Dental association staff from other states held a panel to discuss their respective experiences.

Lastly, as either a business owner or as an employee, the relationship that a dentist has with an insurance company through their participation agreement drives the ability to attract patients and build financial stability. This relationship can be challenging to navigate even in the best of times, but the need for reform is apparent, especially now. The conference provided the MDA the opportunity to learn from the successes and challenges other states faced when addressing issues like network leasing and virtual credit cards as payments.

Engaging with other states at events like this helps the MDA develop strategies that take into account unexpected factors and dynamics that have posed challenges elsewhere. With expectations of a busy year ahead, the valuable conversations of the ADA Lobbyist Conference came at an opportune time to be incorporated into the MDA's advocacy strategy for 2022. ●

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