

Statement of Sen. Sanders
June 7, 2012
Comprehensive Dental Reform Act of 2012

When we talk about the health care crisis in America we often ignore a very important aspect of that crisis. And that is that tens of millions of Americans are unable to access affordable dental care – and they suffer as a result of that. Today, by introducing what we believe is the most comprehensive dental care legislation in American history, we start addressing that issue.

This bill is the result of the work of a whole lot of people and organizations. I especially want to thank Representative Cummings for joining me here and for introducing this legislation in the House of Representatives. I also want to thank all of the advocates here today supporting the bill. We have representatives from the oral health professions and advocates for children, seniors and other vulnerable populations here to tell you why this bill is so critical. I also want to thank my staff members Ashley Cottingham, Sophie Kasimow and Erica Solway.

Let's be clear: the United States is in the midst of a major dental crisis. 130 million Americans have no dental insurance; one-fourth of adults age 65 or older have lost all their teeth; only 45% of Americans age 2 and older had a dental visit in the past 12 months and nearly 17 million low-income children go each year without seeing a dentist.

Over the past year, I have asked people from Vermont and across the country to tell me what a lack of access to dental care has meant to them. I've received more than [1,300 stories](#) – many heartbreaking – that talk about the struggles people around our country experience when trying to get to a dentist. People are suffering and often desperate to find affordable dental care for themselves and their children, especially low income people, racial or ethnic minorities, pregnant women, older adults, those with special needs, and those who live in rural communities.

Simply put, the groups that need care the most are the least likely to get it. As Chair of the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging, I've spent the last several months conducting research, holding a hearing and town hall meeting, and listening to thousands of Americans in order to draft this legislation.

We've learned that access to dental care is about more than a pretty smile. It's about not having to live with extreme pain and not having to struggle even harder to find or keep a job because you've lost all your teeth. It's about maintaining your overall health and self-esteem, and avoiding the increased risk of diabetes, digestive problems and poor birth outcomes that go along with tooth decay.

In order to address the dental crisis facing millions of Americans, the U.S. Congress must take strong action to pass this bill now. Here are some of the things we have to do and that our bill does:

- First, the United States needs more dentists, hygienists and other providers in areas where the need is greatest. Although the Health Resources and Services Administration says we need nearly 10,000 additional dental providers to fill the current gap, dental schools are graduating fewer new dentists than the number needed just to replace those who retire each year. This bill would begin to address this gap, and would also expand the dental workforce to include alternative providers in order to increase access.
- Second, not only do we need more dentists, but we need those in practice to start serving more low-income people. Only 20% of the nation's practicing dentists provide care to people with Medicaid, and only an extremely small percentage devote a substantial part of their practice to caring for those who are underserved. This bill addresses this by creating an incentive to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dentists by assisting the states in covering those costs.
- Third, we have got to expand dental insurance coverage. One third of Americans do not have dental coverage. Traditional Medicare does not cover dental services for the elderly, and states can choose whether their Medicaid programs provide coverage for dental care for low-income adults. This bill extends comprehensive dental care coverage to people with Medicare, Medicaid and VA health coverage.

Additionally, there are successful school- and community-based programs that provide critical dental services to those who need them most. FQHCs, Federally Qualified Health Centers, provide dental services to over 3.5 million people across the country regardless of their ability to pay. In 2011, 80% of these health centers offered preventive dental services, and almost 70% offered restorative dental services. They should be expanded along with efforts to bring care right into schools and nursing homes. This bill includes grant programs to do just that.

I would add here that these programs really work. In Vermont, over the last 7 years, we have built six new beautiful FQHC dental clinics which now provide dental care to 25,000 Vermonters. We are making similar progress around the country but much, much more needs to be done.

Let's not forget that addressing access to dental care will not only help to relieve pain and improve health for millions, but it will save money too. The Pew Center on the States recently released a [report](#) that said that there were 830,000 visits to emergency rooms across the country for preventable dental conditions in 2009, a 16% increase from 2006. This is unacceptable and this bill will help hospitals and other entities work to ensure that oral health care is delivered in the best setting possible for the patient.

In this great nation we can do better. Let's address the dental crisis in America now. Thank you.