



An Act Establishing an Oral Health Commission and Needs Assessment H.2320/S.1378

Lead Sponsors: Rep. Kate Hogan and Sen. Harriette L. Chandler

Background

Dental care is a critical component of overall health care, and yet access to dental coverage and services can be out of reach for many Massachusetts residents. Underserved communities across the state have continued to face the greatest barriers to accessing dental care. These same communities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and exacerbating existing health disparities. Unmet oral health care needs remain a challenge, and helping people stay healthy is more important now than ever. However, data on oral health needs and access to care is extremely outdated, hindering Massachusetts' ability to understand the challenges we face and the policy solutions to pursue to ensure access to dental services. The first step is to get an accurate picture of the oral health needs of residents across the state.

Why is legislation needed?

- It has been more than 20 years since the last special legislative commission on oral health conducted an assessment, and more than 10 years since Massachusetts' last oral health disease burden documentation was published.
- According to [data](#) from the Kaiser Family Foundation, there are 56 federally designated dentist shortage areas in Massachusetts, including 69 cities/towns with no dentist at all; an estimated 325,211 people's dental needs in these areas are not met.
- Twenty percent of adult Massachusetts residents between the ages of 19-64 [reported](#) having unmet medical or dental care needs due to the cost.
- Dental care was the most common type of unmet care need reported in a [recent survey](#), with 15% of insured residents indicating they had an unmet dental need due to cost.

Why is this a health equity issue?

- Access to oral health care is fundamentally an issue of health equity. Black and Latinx families are [more likely](#) to have unmet needs for medical or dental care.
- Black and Latinx families are [less likely](#) than white families to have had a dental visit in the last year.
- Low-income residents are also [less likely](#) to have had a dental visit in the last year.

What does this legislation do?

- Establish a special commission to conduct an oral health needs assessment and provide recommendations.
- The commission would conduct a state-wide assessment to investigate the oral health needs of both adult and pediatric residents and assess gaps in access to oral health care and services across diverse groups.
- The commission would provide recommendations on workforce, infrastructure and policy to address oral health disparities, increase public awareness and work towards health equity. The commission would also establish a statewide oral health data and surveillance system.
- The commission would include broad representation of stakeholders including representatives from the legislature, state and local government agencies, oral health and community providers, consumer advocates, diverse community groups, and academic experts.

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