

Testimony for the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging
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Good morning Chairman Sanders and prestigious members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Cathi Stallings, and I am a social worker from Falls Church, Virginia.

I am here as someone who knows firsthand that dental care is a luxury that many millions of us in America cannot afford. I have paid thousands of dollars for dental work and need thousands more.

I personally am focused on this issue because I am not able to afford to pay the exorbitant cost for the dental work that I need.

Since finding out the extent of my dental needs, I have spent many dark hours wondering how I will afford my future. Several years ago I took out a bank loan to pay for a bridge that I needed. I was told a few months ago that that bridge needs to be replaced. I was quoted the price of \$7,000 for this, but the periodontist said he would give me a discount.

I have quite a few other dental issues. The insurance provided with my job covers only \$1,290 per year, which does not cover even one of the crowns I need, let alone anything else (they have cost me about \$2,000 each). In the past two months, I've needed scaling and root planing for gum disease, as well as an emergency crown when one of my teeth cracked.

As a social worker, I work with severely mentally ill clients, MANY of whom have not been able to afford to go to a dentist in years. Numerous medications cause dry mouth, but with psychotropic medications there can be a more severe effect, as it usually takes more than one medication to treat the mental health symptoms. Saliva helps in preventing dental pathologies, like cavities and gum disease, by the cleansing and antibacterial action.

One of my clients has very few teeth left. He found out two weeks ago that he has three abscesses in his remaining teeth. His Medicaid benefits provide only extractions of teeth – no dental services. If more of his teeth are pulled, it will become increasingly difficult for him to eat.

Another one of my clients receives General Relief funds of \$220 per month to live on. I gave her information about a dentist who was providing a free emergency

exam and x-rays. She went and found out that she needs scaling and root planing for her gum disease. The total price quoted to her for this procedure was \$1600. I then directed her to a lower cost dental service this summer, and she was told that they may have an opening in November, since there is such a long waiting list.

Every day my clients pay for the consequences of their illness and their inability to support themselves.

I had an extremely unusual birthday this year. As I was preparing to go out and celebrate with my mother, I heard on the news about the Maryland Mission of Mercy clinic, where free dental services were being provided. Immediately, I ran out of my home, met my mom outside and told her, "We have to cancel my birthday. I have to go to Laurel, Maryland."

We went and were told they were full for the day, but that I could try again tomorrow. I knew that dental care was much more crucial than celebrating my birthday. So that evening, I went back to Laurel and arrived around 8pm. I was number two in line.

Many others started to show up as time went on. We shared our stories of dental nightmares. I spent the night on the sidewalk, but I didn't mind, because I was getting a great birthday gift. It turns out that the gift was seeing over 400 volunteers in action giving their time and hearts to help give over \$750,000 worth of free dental work that weekend.

I wasn't able to get the dental services I was hoping for, as they weren't able to do specifically what I needed. But I came away with a scene that I will never forget-- men and women of every race, creed and color lined up for what seemed like a mile -- in dire need, with the hope of being helped. It was truly heart-breaking for me to see.

I have learned that the lack of adequate dental care can lead to diabetes, chronic heart disease and strokes. These risks are scary.....for me and so many others. But YOU have the solution in your hands.

I am a social worker. These are my clients. But on this issue ALL of us are standing together in the same line, looking for help.

I beg you to pass this legislation so that help can be provided. Thank you for your valuable time and attention to this critical matter.