



Advancing Dental Education

Testimony of:

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The New York State Assembly/Senate Committees on Higher Education

&

The New York State Senate Committee on Finance &

The New York State Assembly Committee on Ways and Means

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Hearing Room B

Good afternoon, Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Stavisky and Hyndman, as well as other distinguished members of the New York State (NYS) Legislature. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Executive budget proposal for state fiscal year 2027.

My name is Jennifer Tassler, Vice President for Government Relations and Strategic Affairs for the New York State Academic Dental Centers (NYSADC). NYSADC is the consortium of the six dental schools in New York State. NYSADC works in partnership with its members to advance dental education and address disparities in oral health care.

NYSADC is urging the Legislature to address some of the critical issues facing the academic dental centers serving as the primary safety net for New Yorkers. NYSADC requests the Legislature continue to fund the Fellowship to Address Oral Health Disparities at \$750,000 to fund advanced training in special needs dentistry to help one of the most vulnerable populations. NYSADC also asks that the State continue to invest in developing the future oral health workforce through loan repayment, practice support programs and outreach to ensure equitable geographic distribution. Finally, NYSADC is requesting a targeted rate increase to \$300 per visit for the dental schools to alleviate the structural gap between the cost of providing care and the reimbursement for those visits.

NYSADC Fellowship to Address Oral Health Disparities

An estimated 7.3 million people in the United States (U.S.) have an intellectual or other developmental disability (I/DD). Individuals with I/DD bear a disproportionately high burden of oral disease and remain at higher risk of oral diseases throughout their lives. The most common dental conditions include untreated carries, periodontitis, significant oral pain, gingivitis, and injured or missing teeth, but some I/DD conditions, such as cerebral palsy, down syndrome, and Sjogren's syndrome can further exacerbate and accelerate dental problems. Unfortunately, systemic barriers to access have contributed to chronically poorer oral and overall health for people with I/DD. Nationwide, individuals with I/DDs receive dental evaluations 17 percent less frequently than the general population. Those who do receive dental evaluations are still significantly

less likely to receive treatments required to address patient concerns; such treatments can range from basic cleanings to reconstructive surgeries.

Systemic Challenges

There is a persistent shortage of dental providers in the U.S. who treat patients with moderate to severe I/DD, with only 10 percent of general practice dentists reporting that they regularly treat individuals with cerebral palsy, intellectual disability or other medically compromising conditions. The historical lack of exposure to, and specialized training for, patients with I/DD in dental schools has created a dearth of willing providers and perpetuated a culture of uncertainty and hesitancy in treating this population.

Despite updated curricular requirements and increased education, access to clinical training remains a barrier for general practice dentists seeking to treat patients with I/DD. Indeed, the number of postgraduate training opportunities in New York State has contracted in the past several years. Graduates of these advanced training programs had frequently gone on to practice in major hospital systems throughout the northeast and these closures create a significant gap and threatens the pipeline of dental providers in New York State with advanced training for patients with special needs.

NYSADC Fellowship to Address Oral Health Disparities

The New York State Academic Dental Centers (NYSADC) designed and piloted its Fellowship to Address Oral Health Disparities in 2021, and has since had three fellows complete the programs at NYU College of Dentistry and the Touro College of Dental Medicine. All three fellows have entered practice and are currently working in the Hudson Valley and the Bronx caring for patients with special needs. NYSADC is currently wrapping up a new application cycle for the fellowship and is expecting the program to be fully subscribed with four new fellows across New York State.

The fellowship consists of a one-year intensive training program focused on patients with I/DD that follows completion of a General Practice Residency (GPR) or Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) program. Fellows provide direct patient care in clinical settings that specialize in serving patients with special needs for the duration of the fellowship year. Fellows are also required to devote at least one day per week during the fellowship year to teaching and/or conducting research at one of New York State's six academic

dental centers. Committing 20 percent of the fellow’s time to academic and teaching work helps mitigate another training barrier for undergraduate dental students – the relative shortage of dental faculty with direct experience providing care for patients with I/DD. By leveraging the clinical experience of the fellows, the academic dental centers can expand undergraduate students’ exposure to practitioners treating this underserved population.

Upon completion of the fellowship year, fellows commit to working at a site in New York State with a significant I/DD patient population (as determined by scoring metrics to be developed by NYSADC) and continuing teaching and/or conducting research at a dental school for one year. This service commitment can alternatively be fulfilled by providing part-time care at an approved facility and continuing teaching and/or research responsibilities over two years. Additionally, NYSADC will continue to cultivate fellows and graduates of the fellowship program as mentors to undergraduates and postgraduates interested in providing care for people with I/DD.

Finally, NYSADC will formalize and expand the fellowship curriculum and recruit a program director to oversee curricula and coordinate fellows’ teaching and research experiences statewide. NYSADC is also working towards additional ways to incentivize dentists to care for patients with special needs, including practice support, loan repayment, additional training and increased reimbursement.

New York State Academic Dental Centers requests that the Legislature appropriate \$750,000 for State fiscal year 2026-2027 to support fellowships and paths to provide advanced clinical training in the provision of oral health care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Loan Repayment for Dentists Treating Vulnerable Populations

As of 2024, more than 82% of dental graduates began their careers with \$296,500 or more in student loan debt. This debt burden influences important decisions about specialty, practice setting and payor mix. Further, future dentists are facing increased financial pressure from the federal student borrowing caps imposed by H.R. 1 which may strongly influence choice of specialty and location. Implementing a loan repayment program in New York will diminish the role debt plays in decision-making about pursuing special care dentistry or caring for Medicaid patients which, due in part to an inadequate Medicaid reimbursement

structure, is typically associated with lower compensation than other dental specialties. NYSADC strongly supports state funded loan repayment programs to help address the barriers to dentists, especially early career dentists, pursuing this career path.

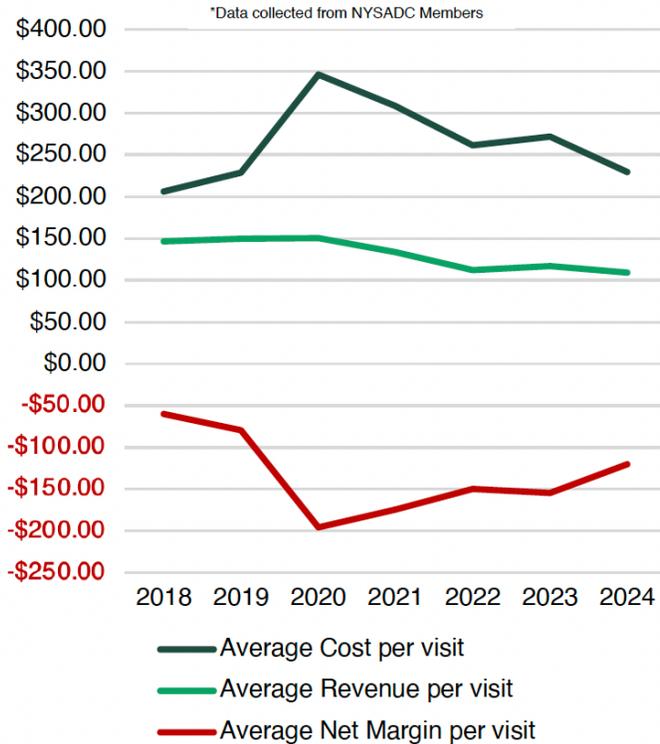
NYSADC is pleased that the Governor has begun accepting applications for the Health Care Access Loan Repayment (HEALR) program funded through the Section 1115 Waiver which provides up to \$100,000 of loan repayment for dentists who treat a significant percentage of Medicaid patients. In addition to increasing the network sufficiency of Medicaid plans, this program will help bring providers who care for patients with I/DD, the vast majority of whom rely on public insurance. NYSADC urges the Legislature to consider additional loan repayment programs for dentists and dental hygienists, such as expanding the Doctors Across New York Program or creating an analogous program for oral health professionals. NYSADC also supports expanding rural health exposure programs like “Take A Look” to dentists.

Medicaid Rate Increase for the Academic Dental Centers

Approximately 7 million individuals in NYS are enrolled in Medicaid and roughly 4 million members rely on the adult dental benefits package provided by the state. While New York State is one of 14 states in the country offering extensive dental benefits to its Medicaid population, patients experience many clinical, operational and financial barriers to care severely limiting access to care. These barriers include prolonged wait times for appointments from 12 to 24 months, a lack of providers accepting their public insurance and geographic challenges.

At NYSADC member academic dental centers (ADCs), average cost per visit for patients on Medicaid skyrocketed to more than \$300 in 2020-2021 due to the pandemic. And while these costs have since stabilized and even declined since then to approximately \$230 per visit in 2024, the average cost per visit remains persistently higher than pre-pandemic. At the same time, average revenue per Medicaid patient visit has remained persistently low and, in fact, remains *lower* than pre-pandemic, leading to record deficits for over 250,000 Medicaid patient visits in 2024.

Average Costs versus Average Revenue of Medicaid Visits at NYS Academic Dental Centers 2018-2024



On average, 74% of the patient base treated at ADCs in NYS rely on Medicaid or Medicaid Managed Care, with up to 90% at certain institutions. Our member ADCs each experience annual losses from \$1 million to \$11 million due to inadequate Medicaid reimbursement, requiring the institutions to offset losses through other avenues such as student tuition and scaling back clinical capacities. This is an unsustainable model that not only hurts the health of the patient, but it also destabilizes critical avenues of care for New Yorkers across the state.

By increasing reimbursement rates for ADCs, dental care can be consistently delivered to patients across the state. Regular visits to the dentist allow for preventative dental care practices to take shape, reducing the frequency of extreme conditions that can significantly reduce one’s quality of life. This expansion of coverage facilitates the accessibility of basic oral healthcare for patients across the state and ensures all New Yorkers have the opportunity to achieve positive health outcomes and lead healthy lives.

NYSADC requests a structured rate increase of Medicaid reimbursement to \$300 per visit for dental care at academic dental centers (ADCs) across the state to address the large-scale losses at the ADCs, which currently serve as the primary oral healthcare for a significant proportion of dental Medicaid visits in the state.

Closing

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of academic dentistry. I welcome any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,
Jennifer Tassler, J.D.

NYSADC Member Institutions

Columbia University College of Dental Medicine
New York University College of Dentistry
Stony Brook University School of Dental Medicine
Touro College of Dental Medicine
University at Buffalo School of Dental Medicine
University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry