

MEDICAID DENTAL SERVICES IN KANSAS

Kansas' Medicaid program transitioned to a managed care system known as KanCare on January 1, 2013, and KanCare services are provided by three private managed care organizations. KanCare includes comprehensive dental services for children under age 18. The Medicaid program places a high value on ensuring kids' overall health is maintained by including dental services for this population. Once teens become adults, though, they no longer have access to comprehensive dental services through KanCare. Nothing changes in their lives at that point aside from their age. Teeth are a critical part of how people stay healthy by being able to eat healthy foods. Healthy teeth also improve people's appearance, which makes it easier to get a job and become self-sufficient. But, when kids on KanCare turn 18, they are no longer able to visit a dentist to keep their teeth healthy and to fight infections in the mouth that can spread to other parts of the body.

Research shows that people who receive routine dental services are able to better manage dental disease that could lead to more serious and costly health problems, including diabetes, pneumonia, stroke, and heart conditions. Investing in comprehensive routine dental services can and does help reduce future healthcare costs.

The three KanCare managed care organizations offer a preventive dental benefit for adults as a part of their value-added services. The preventive benefit provides cleanings and x-rays once or twice a year. The preventive dental benefit marks the biggest step forward in our state's history in terms of addressing the dental needs of the state's most vulnerable adults, but this is just the beginning. The people who are covered by this benefit are very low-income and likely have experienced many years of dental neglect. Each year only 2% of the adults enrolled in Medicaid use the preventive benefit. People often find themselves discouraged from obstacles they encounter when seeking dental care. These might include searching for providers in their area that accept KanCare, arranging an appointment to minimize lost work hours, and finding reliable transportation. Because of prolonged neglect, it is often impossible to provide dental cleanings for people who have decay and cavities and need fillings and root canals in order to be restored to dental health.

Each year over 18,900 visits are made to Kansas emergency rooms by people experiencing dental pain. The only services provided in the emergency room are prescriptions for antibiotics and/or pain medication. While each of these visits does not represent a cost to the Medicaid



program, the visits do represent a cost to the Kansas healthcare system. Emergency rooms are not the appropriate place for people with dental problems, and treatment is not offered there.

Access to comprehensive dental services saves taxpayer dollars, and it gives people self-esteem, helps them get and keep jobs, and helps them stay healthy in the face of other chronic diseases. ■

NOTE: Unduplicated data regarding the number of active Medicaid dental providers in each county was not available for this report from state resources. According to the American Dental Association's Health Policy Institute, in 2015, there were 415 professionally active dentists that participate in Medicaid or work in a Federally Qualified Health Centers in Kansas. There are 1,633 professionally active dentists in the state, which means 25.4% of dentists were providing dental services actively in the state in 2015.