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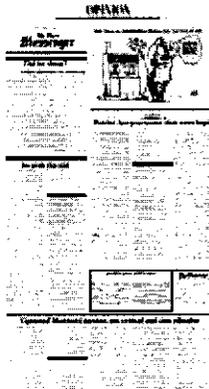
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'Optional' Medicaid services are critical and cost effective

By DAVID J. OWSIANY

Ohio's policymakers have had to make many tough choices during deliberations over the state's budget. In this challenging environment, Gov. John Kasich and members of the House of Representatives should be applauded for recommending that "optional" Medicaid services, such as dental, vision and podiatric care for adults, continue to be made available to our most vulnerable citizens. This policy decision is not only the right thing to do to ensure the continued health of underserved populations, it is also a sound budgetary decision.

Kasich and legislative leaders have recognized the cost-effectiveness of providing access to preventive care, like dental services, to Medicaid recipients. Providing continued access to a dentist or other primary care provider, will help save the state money in the long term by eliminating future costly hospital emer-

gency room visits.

with these afflictions will present to the hospital emergency room for treatment if they can no longer receive services in private dental offices or dental clinics.

Hospital emergency room costs for a Medicaid recipient seeking treatment for an oral health issue can exceed \$400 for an examination, X-rays, prescriptions for pain and infection, and other services. Most hospitals are not equipped to provide dental treatment so patients may receive prescriptions for pain medication and antibiotics but the underlying oral condition remains untreated. This increases the likelihood of multiple return visits. Further, a hospital admission for a dental-related problem increases costs exponentially, potentially costing the state several thousand dollars. By contrast, an extraction of a problem tooth in a dental office costs Medicaid just \$52, of which the state's share is around \$20.

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For example, many of the dental services provided in the adult dental Medicaid program are emergency services. In 2009, dentists performed 348,000 extractions, 475,000 restorations and nearly 32,000 root canals for adult Medicaid recipients. That is more than 850,000 procedures performed as a result of dental pain, infection and decay. Many of the patients suffering

understanding that "optional" services are part of primary care and promote prevention and positive health outcomes for Ohioans through care coordination. Many times, serious systemic health issues like heart disease and diabetes can be linked with dental, vision and podiatric health concerns.

Oral health care in particular is integral to overall health. So, in addition to providing cost savings, the dental Medicaid program also plays an integral role in disease management. For example, individuals with diabetes are more likely to have periodontal disease than those without diabetes. Research shows that when periodontal infections were treated, the management of the patients' diabetes markedly improved.

Providing coverage for dental services allows dentists to identify and treat dental disease in the most effective manner possible. According to the Ohio Department of Health, life-threatening

cancers of the mouth and throat are detected in three Ohioans every day. Additionally, Medicaid patients are generally in need of more substantive dental work (extractions, restorative work and dental surgery) that only dentists are trained to perform. It is critical for patients to have access to a dentist for the purpose of obtaining a diagnosis and development of an effective and efficient treatment plan.

Maintaining "optional" Medicaid services in the state budget is the right thing to do for Ohio. Continuance of these critical services is important to improving the health of our most vulnerable populations and helps promote cost savings in the Medicaid system during difficult budgetary times.

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