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Oral health services barriers studied at University of Albany

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ALBANY — Lack of access to oral health services is recognized as a serious public health problem that results in poor oral health status for many high-needs populations, according to a study conducted by the Oral Health Workforce Research Center (OHWRC) at the University at Albany’s Center for Health Workforce Studies (CHWS) in collaboration with the Association of American Medical Colleges.

U.S. consumers were asked about their oral health status and perceived barriers to care. Cost was the most frequently cited reason for not seeking needed oral health services.

While the majority of survey respondents who indicated a need for dental care received those services within a year (70.9%), nearly 30% did not receive needed services.

The most commonly identified barriers to seeking needed care included the inability to pay for it (22.2%), followed by difficulty finding a dentist who accepted their dental insurance (7.0%), anxiety about going to the dentist (6.7%), and an inability to find time to see a dentist (6.3%).

The most commonly identified facilitators of obtaining needed oral health services was having dental insurance (22.0%), the availability of dentists who accept the respondent’s insurance (16.1%), and more convenient hours of dental services (11.5%).

Policy implications for this research study include:

- A comprehensive adult Medicaid dental benefit could potentially increase the utilization of dental services, and improve oral health outcomes.
- Strategies to expand access to services include supporting new and existing capacity in the oral health safety net.
- Good oral health literacy can lead to improvements in oral hygiene and play an important role in increasing access to needed oral health services.

“While nationwide trends show a decrease in utilization of oral health services among U.S. adults, declines differ dramatically among specific racial and ethnic groups, as well as by socioeconomic characteristics. These continue to be powerful determinants of access to and utilization of care,” CHWS Project Director Simona Surdu said.

“Current national and state efforts to expand access to high-quality oral health care and to educate the public about the importance of maintaining good oral health should continue in order to improve the oral health status among underserved populations.”

To view the report, visit the CHWS website at: <https://www.chwsny.org/>

Established in 1996, CHWS is an academic research organization, based at the School of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY).

The mission of CHWS is to provide timely, accurate data and conduct policy relevant research about the health workforce. The research conducted by CHWS supports and promotes health workforce planning and policymaking at local, regional, state, and national levels.

Today, CHWS is a national leader in the field of health workforce studies, and the only HRSA-sponsored center with a unique focus on the oral health workforce.

This work was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$449,821.

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