

## ***Restored Medi-Cal Dental Adult Benefit is Improving Access to Periodontal Treatment in Adults***

### ***Background***

In 2009, California eliminated most dental services for adults from its Medi-Cal program. As a result, many community members have experienced huge gaps in care and high costs for important dental procedures that result in physical and mental health issues, unemployment, and the furthering of health disparities. One such example of these conditions is periodontitis, a serious gum infection that can lead to tooth loss and is also a risk factor for heart and lung disease. An estimated 42% of adults in the United States age 30 or above have periodontitis, with even higher rates among low-income adults<sup>1</sup>. Although untreated periodontitis can have serious health implications, it can be treated and controlled through deep cleaning, also known as root scaling and planning, a procedure where a dental professional removes plaque and food particles from the space between teeth and the jawbone. With deep cleaning and proper dental hygiene, gums suffering from periodontitis can heal.

### ***Increasing Access to Gum Treatments***

For several years, CPEHN and its grassroots community partners, such as Korean Resources Center and Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles have advocated for the full restoration of adult dental benefits to improve oral health access for adults in California. In 2017, California finally restored the remaining adult dental benefits not already restored in 2014, including deep cleanings to treat periodontitis.

Immediately following their restoration, deep cleanings became the most commonly utilized dental benefits among adults, with 498,937 deep cleanings taking place in 2018.<sup>2</sup> In Los Angeles County alone, 225,927 deep cleanings were recorded. The next four most-billed services were already a part of the adult benefit prior to 2018, indicating the high need for this previously unavailable service.

### ***Moving Forward***

Although the restoration of the adult dental benefit has helped thousands of Californians get access to an important health care service, there is still much work to be done to improve Medi-Cal Dental. Despite the restoration, overall utilization rates remain low, with statewide utilization rates growing by only one to two percent across all service categories (annual dental visits, preventative services, dental exams, diagnostic services, and dental treatments).

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Periodontal Disease," December 14, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/conditions/periodontal-disease.html>.

<sup>2</sup> California Department of Health Care Services, "Los Angeles Stakeholder Fact Sheet, January 2018 to December 2018," February 20, 2019, [https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/Documents/MDS/LA%20Dental%20Stakeholders%20Meeting/LA\\_Stakeholder\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_2-20-19\\_final.pdf](https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/Documents/MDS/LA%20Dental%20Stakeholders%20Meeting/LA_Stakeholder_Fact_Sheet_2-20-19_final.pdf).