

Improving Whole Health for Veterans with Chronic Conditions Act

Cosponsors: Whitehouse, Welch, Merkley, Wyden, Blumenthal, Booker, Fetterman, Menendez, Durbin, Stabenow, Hirono,

House Lead: Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA-26)

Organizational Support: American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), American Institute of Dental Public Health (AIDPH), American Dental Hygienists' Association, American Heart Association, AMVETS, Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors, Care in Action, CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, Common Defense, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Minority Veterans of America (MVA), National Domestic Workers Alliance, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), National Council on Aging, Public Citizen, Save our VA (SOVA), SMART Recovery, Social Security Works, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW),

Background: This bill would provide comprehensive dental care to veterans diagnosed with diabetes or ischemic heart disease for a period of four years to study the health care outcomes and cost effectiveness of such care. Out of the 9.2 million veterans enrolled in VA healthcare, only 1.4 million are eligible for comprehensive dental care. However, in 2020, VA dental services provided care for only 463,000 eligible veterans, and only 80,000 additional veterans purchased dental insurance through the VA Dental Insurance Program. This leaves the vast majority of veterans, especially those who cannot afford private health insurance without dental care.

It is widely understood that poor dental hygiene is directly linked to other chronic health care conditions like diabetes and heart disease. [A study](#) has found that people with periodontitis, or gum disease, have a greater risk of experiencing a major cardiovascular event, such as a heart attack or stroke. The study found that gum disease leads to increased arterial inflammation, which is responsible for cardiovascular problems.

Additionally, according to the [American Diabetes Association](#), diabetes triples the risk of getting periodontal disease, and an individual with [diabetes and periodontal disease](#) is three times more likely to develop cardiorenal mortality (a fatal combination of ischemic heart disease and diabetic nephropathy).

According to VA, in 2020, 2,993,000 veterans enrolled in VA were diagnosed with diabetes, while only 433,000 were eligible for dental care through the VA. Likewise, 639,000 veterans were diagnosed with Ischemic Heart Disease, while only 161,000 were eligible for dental care. This left just over 3 million veterans with diabetes and heart disease without access to affordable, comprehensive dental care to treat or prevent periodontal disease, increasing their exposure to the fatal risks associated with these conditions.

In 2020 VA spent an average of \$86,000 per veteran per year on health care for veterans with heart disease, while it spent an average of \$11,000 on veterans with diabetes. Compare that with the \$1,132 it costs the VA annually to provide a veteran with comprehensive dental care. In

addition, veterans without access to dental care often utilize emergency rooms for dental needs at \$1,520 per visit. For example, according to the [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#), of the 2 million Americans who visited the ER in 2018 for dental emergencies, 1.9 million could have been treated by a dentist, reducing associated ER expenses by 78%. In the past four years, VA has spent over \$124 million on emergency room care for veterans with oral health problems who don't have access to affordable dental care.

Care Quest and AIDPH estimate that if 50% of veterans are treated for gum disease, over six billion dollars would be saved annually in heart disease and diabetes treatments.