



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
January 26, 2021

**Contact: Jennifer Johnson**  
**Cell: 615.478.6996**  
**Email: [jjohnson@TNJustice.org](mailto:jjohnson@TNJustice.org)**

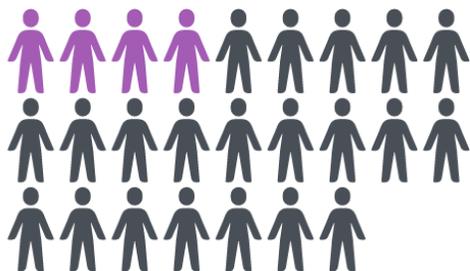
## **Policy Brief Reveals Gaping Deficiencies in Dental Access for Tennesseans**

**Nashville, TN-** The Tennessee Justice Center has authored a [public policy brief](#) that shines a disturbing light on the oral health of Tennessee residents and identifies the barriers preventing more than a million Tennesseans from having access to basic dental care. When it comes to dental access and oral health outcomes, Tennessee ranks near the bottom nationally. Low-income families, people of color, and those living in rural parts of the state are at a higher risk due to lack of insurance and/or the provider shortage that exists in many areas.

Kinika Young, Senior Director of Health Policy and Equity for the TN Justice Center says, “Federal law requires state Medicaid programs to include dental benefits for children because they recognize dental care is essential to healthy child development. For adult enrollees, it is optional, and unfortunately, Tennessee is one of only three states in the country that does not currently offer dental benefits to adult Medicaid enrollees. Even if it did, only 30% of Tennessee dentists see Medicaid patients. That’s a huge problem.”

In 2019, more than **44,000 Tennesseans went to the ER for an emergency dental procedure**, which is three times more costly than a trip to the dentist. Additionally, most medical doctors lack the training and diagnostic equipment to perform dental extractions.

When it comes to oral health, wealth makes a difference. A 2015 survey of Tennesseans provides just a glimpse. Among those who have not been to the dentist in the last 12 months, 70% identified “cost” as the main reason.



# 16%

of low-income adults rated the condition of their mouth and teeth as “poor”, compared to 7% of middle-income adults and 0% of high-income adults

In November, state officials acknowledged the problems that exist by requesting almost 95 million be allocated to the TN Department of Health, the UT College of Dentistry, and Meharry Medical College’s School of Dentistry over the next five years to increase capacity and make oral healthcare more affordable. It is unclear whether the Governor plans to include that proposal or funding to expand dental benefits to adults on TennCare in the budget that will be unveiled in a matter of weeks.

Cherae Farmer-Dixon, the Dean of Meharry Medical College’s School of Dentistry, has this to say about the policy brief. “This multi-tiered approach to a multi-faceted problem is needed to help achieve health care equity for all Tennesseans. These comprehensive strategies would increase capacity and compensation, upgrade policies, and expand benefits for underserved communities. More importantly, the brief creates an opportunity for inclusivity among diverse groups, institutions, and organizations that are working collaboratively to make oral health more accessible to improve the lives of all Tennesseans.”

**If you know someone uninsured who needs to see a dentist, TJC has compiled a list of free and low-cost clinics across the state. For a list of providers, [click here](#).**