

SENIOR VOICE

Serving Older Alaskans and Their Families Since 1978

A publication of *Older Persons Action Group, Inc.*, 325 E. Third Ave., Suite 300, Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Vol. 32 No. 11 November, 2009

Desperate senior prompts denture legislation

By SEN. JOHNNY ELLIS

Late last summer, an elderly man walked into my office and threatened to commit suicide. Needless to say, it was a very tense and upsetting situation for me and my staff. This gentleman had come from the Medicaid Adult Dental office, where he had been told that he had a choice — he could receive either the upper half or the lower half of the dentures that he needed, but not both, at least not in the same year. Of course, this set of options was really no choice at all, seeing as how he had no teeth at all. The state's wholly inadequate response to this constituent's unfortunate situation set my office in motion, and I am prepared to introduce legislation this session with bipartisan support that will provide a common-sense fix to an otherwise successful and needed program.

Medicaid Adult Dental was created three years ago. Until that time, Medicaid only covered emergency dental services for low income Alaskans. By expanding the program to cover preventative care — exams, cleanings, root canals, fillings and dentures — the state has saved millions of dollars and patients have avoided painful surgeries as the need for emergency care declines. In addition, good dental health

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is closely linked with decreased risk for diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other serious diseases. Last year, the legislature unanimously made this successful program permanent.

The program limits the care that can be paid for in a single year, which is intended as a cost-control measure, an important feature in these uncertain budgetary times. Unfortunately, these measures go beyond cost control and have impacted the function of the program by limiting patients to half of a set of dentures per year. In public testimony on these limits, it was suggested that a patient could receive the upper dentures on June 30, the final day of the state fiscal year, and the lower dentures on July 1. I don't believe that we should be punishing citizens who happen to require dental care in the fall or winter, and I don't believe that dentists should be forced to schedule the care their patients need to make things more convenient for bureaucrats. This is the kind of frustrating flaw in our

system that drives people crazy and gives government a bad name.

That's why I have worked with the Department of Health and Social Services to develop a way to allow patients who qualify for dentures under the Medicaid Adult Dental program to receive their full set of dentures in one sitting, without destroying the cost-control mechanisms currently in place. The bill will be introduced when the legislature goes back into session in January, and I am pleased to have received bi-partisan support from my colleagues in the Senate.

In fact, as I have continued to work on this issue, I have heard more and more about how much sense this small change makes. A dentist in Juneau told me about the patients he sees from all around Southeast Alaska. The state pays for them to fly to Juneau, pays for their lodging, and pays for one half of their dentures. Then, a little while later, public money is spent to do it all over again for the other half. Allowing him and other

dentists to consolidate the care they are giving into one session will make the program a more efficient use of public money and improve the quality of care received by patients.

State government can be a large and unwieldy bureaucracy, and change is hard to do and often happens slowly. Most of the attention goes to the big issues that attract press coverage or help generate campaign slogans. But sometimes, there are issues that require us to place people over politics and give a direct benefit to the neighbors and constituents we are privileged to serve. It's too late for the gentleman who threatened to kill himself in my office — we worked with him to get his dentures through the existing two-year process — but it's not too late for others in his situation. This may be a small bill, and it won't change the world, but it will improve the lives of a few senior citizens in need — and that's a job I'm glad to do.

Senator Johnny Ellis represents downtown and midtown Anchorage in the Alaska State Senate and serves as the Majority Leader of the Senate Bi-Partisan Working Group.