



American
Association of
Orthodontists®

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Policies to Smile About this World Orthodontic Health Day
Orthodontists Highlight Policies Supporting Access to Quality Care

ST. LOUIS, May 14, 2024 – This World Orthodontic Health Day, May 15, members of the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) are drawing attention to policies that protect patients and expand access to orthodontic care. First proclaimed by the World Federation of Orthodontists in 2017, the day is an opportunity for orthodontists around the world to celebrate and highlight orthodontics. The AAO – which represents 19,000 orthodontist members throughout the United States, Canada, and abroad – hopes consumers and lawmakers continue to learn about the importance of protections for patients from practices that reduce quality of care and safety, and support easing the burden of student loan debt.

“World Orthodontic Health Day is an opportunity to shine a light on the policies orthodontists are advocating for and why,” said **Trey Lawrence, AAO CEO**. “We continue to hear and remain concerned about the harms that mail-order orthodontic treatment models may cause without an initial in-person examination, without x-rays specific for treatment, and the inability for patients to correct problems or contact the doctors overseeing their cases. Patient health and safety is at the forefront for AAO advocacy priorities, as is the importance of easing the burden of student loan debt, which has a direct impact on the public’s access to orthodontic care.”

Dedicated to improving the health of the public by promoting quality orthodontic care, the importance of oral health care and its impact on overall health, the AAO has worked with lawmakers at the state and federal levels to make a difference, with recent successes on key issues throughout the country.

Patient Health and Safety:

Dental boards and state legislatures throughout the United States have expressed concern that patients who elect to receive mail-order orthodontic treatment are not being adequately protected. Often promoted as “easy” and “affordable,” some providers portray treatment (especially straightening only the front teeth) as only “cosmetic.” But the research shows that

moving teeth is a medical procedure that involves complex biological processes and should be monitored in-person by a trained dental professional.

If aligners are used to move teeth when the patient is not an appropriate candidate for treatment, irreversible harm like loose teeth, loss of tooth roots, and impairment of chewing and other oral function can occur. The AAO states that the only way to effectively evaluate a patient for orthodontic treatment is in-person: through a physical examination, x-rays and periodontal assessment.

Nevada Patient Health and Safety Policy

In 2023, Nevada Governor Joe Lombardo signed AAO landmark teledentistry legislation into law, requiring an in-person examination prior to orthodontic treatment. The AAO offered patient health and safety recommendations during the rulemaking process by the Nevada State Board of Dental Examiners for implementation of the law which took effect on May 1, 2024. The AAO remains engaged through monitoring the implementation of this law.

Florida Patient Health and Safety Policy

Senate Bill 302 and its companion bill, House Bill 855, requiring an in-person examination and “a dentist of record to remain primarily responsible for all dental treatments for a patient treated through telehealth,” moved through the process in the Sunshine State this year. House Bill 855 ultimately passed the Legislature on March 4. In Florida, the Governor can sign the bill into law, allow it to become law without his signature, or veto the bill. The effective date for this legislation is July 1, 2024, and the bill could be sent to Governor Ron DeSantis as late as June for his approval.

Georgia Patient Health and Safety Policy

House Bill 441, which would authorize and regulate teledentistry by licensed dentists pursuant to permits issued by the Georgia Board of Dentistry, passed unanimously through the Georgia House and Senate during the 2024 state legislative session. House Bill 441 would require an in-person exam prior to receiving care via teledentistry and also indicates that insurance cannot require teledentistry in-lieu of in-person care. On May 7, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp vetoed the bill citing concerns with financial impact and implications in other sections of the legislation outside of AAO priorities, along with concerns with access to existing teledentistry services in Georgia. The AAO is disappointed with this veto and Georgia patients deserve better.

Illinois Patient Health and Safety Policy

Senate Bill 2586, relating to teledentistry and patient health and safety, passed favorably in the Senate Licensed Activities Committee before passing unanimously on the Illinois Senate floor. The bill was heard in the Illinois House Health Care Licenses Committee, with Rep. Anna Moeller as the sponsor. The committee voted in favor of the bill, with an expectation that it will

return to committee with amendment language. The AAO continues to fight for patient health and safety priorities throughout the amendment process as work continues on this legislation with an impending adjournment deadline for the Illinois legislature by the end of May.

Student Debt Impacts Access to Care:

Graduating orthodontic residents today average over \$560,000 in student loan debt. Current federal student loan policy does not account for a professional's ability to repay student loans, resulting in policies that compound the student loan crisis and undermine a federal goal to expand the number of medical professionals in the United States.

"The AAO is concerned about the burden of such large amounts of debt on its current members, in addition to discouraging future members – particularly those from underserved communities – from entering the specialty," said **John Callahan, DDS, MS, President of the AAO**. "Many lawmakers we speak with are surprised to learn orthodontic and dental residents do not have the ability to defer interest on their student loans during their extensive residency periods. They're also struck by the significant debt burden these graduates carry, a factor that significantly influences their decisions on where to establish their practices."

Student Loan Refinancing and Recalculation Act

In October 2023, Representative John Garamendi (D-CA) and Representative Brian K. Fitzpatrick (R-PA) reintroduced the bipartisan "Student Loan Refinancing and Recalculation Act." The act, (H.R.5710), would allow students with federal loans to refinance their interest rates, lower future interest rates, eliminate origination fees on student loans, defer interest rate accrual for low-income and middle-class borrowers while they are pursuing their education, eliminate interest capitalization for federal student loans, and allow for borrowers in medical, dental, or veterinary residencies to defer payments until the completion of their program.

Residential Education Deferred Interest (REDI) Act

A second piece of common sense, bipartisan legislation addressing student loan interest deferral, the Residential Education Deferred Interest (REDI) Act (H.R. 1202) was also introduced during 2023 for the 118th Congress. Led by Representatives Brian Babin (R-TX) and Chrissy Houlahan (D-PA), the REDI Act would amend the Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide interest-free deferment for borrowers in orthodontic residency programs. Deferment of interest will prevent students from being punished during their residency with higher debt balances and make it easier for them to open practices in underserved areas.

Florida Student Loan Policy

AAO member advocates including the AAO's Florida National Advocacy Network team, Florida Association of Orthodontists leadership, and the Florida Dental Association worked together last year to ensure \$2 million was added to the Dental Student Loan Repayment Program and

continued that work in 2024 with Senate Bill 7016. This bill contains language appropriating a recurring \$8 million to the Dental Student Loan Repayment Program that encourages dentists and orthodontists to serve the Medicaid population in dental health professional shortage areas and medically underserved areas throughout Florida. The program allows for better dental care access, while also investing in Florida's dental workforce. Last month, Governor DeSantis signed this bill into law, making \$8 million in funding available to the Dental Student Loan Repayment Program in the upcoming year and on a recurring basis going forward.

"AAO members advocating through grassroots engagement in states and at the Federal level matters and continues to make an impact," **said Nathan Mick, AAO Vice President of Federal and State Advocacy.** "We will continue working hard and making a difference through the leadership and voices of our AAO members who care deeply about the profession, the safety of patients and access to care. Oftentimes policy must keep up with a changing world to protect patients, and on this World Orthodontic Health Day, we hope we can draw attention to this work."

For more information on these AAO advocacy priorities and the scientific evidence supporting them, please visit www.orthofacts.org.

About the American Association of Orthodontists

The American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) represents 19,000 orthodontist members throughout the United States, Canada and abroad. Founded in 1900, AAO is the world's oldest and largest dental specialty organization. AAO is dedicated to ethically advancing the art and science of orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics worldwide; improving the overall oral healthcare of the public; advocating for the health and safety of the public; and educating the public about the benefits of orthodontic treatment provided by an orthodontic specialist. For more information, visit www.aainfo.org.

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