

## Addressing Dental Care Delays in DOC Prisons

After addressing complaints from incarcerated patients regarding delayed access to dental care statewide, the OCO has effectively negotiated a resolution with DOC. This agreement aims to tackle dental appointment backlogs and enhance the timeliness of services.

### Overview

From 2022 through 2024, the Office of the Corrections Ombuds (OCO) received and investigated 153 complaints related to dental care. The OCO assisted with confirming patients were scheduled for appointments, emergency care, and tracked cancelations and delays. **Through individual case investigations and systemic reviews, the OCO identified the following priority concerns related to dental care for incarcerated patients:**

- Delayed, cancelled, and rescheduled appointments
- Long wait times for testing and treatment
- Dentists scheduling fewer than five patients a day
- Limited dental staffing and availability
- Limited data and tracking of backlog
- Patients on mechanical soft diets for long periods of time while awaiting dentures

### OCO Actions & Outcomes

In Fall 2024, the OCO urged DOC Health Services leadership to create a plan to address the long backlog of dental appointments that were put on hold when COVID began. COVID safety protocols had been updated and patients could once again see dental for routine and urgent care needs; however, patients still reported delayed access to dental care and the backlog continued to grow. After OCO meetings with DOC Health Services leadership, DOC assigned project managers to assist with accurately tracking and addressing the dental backlog. **The DOC Assistant Secretary of Health Services agreed to continue monthly meetings with the OCO to provide updates about dental services across the state.**

The OCO identified that DOC dentists were handling their own scheduling and taking fewer than five patients a day. **After lengthy negotiations, the DOC agreed to ensure dental appointments are set by the scheduling specialists with a goal of increasing the number of appointments.** DOC created a scheduling tool that outlines the typical timelines needed for different procedures so that schedulers can build schedules that match community standards. **DOC also moved forward with staffing and preparing the traveling dental clinic.**

As the OCO continues to receive dental concerns from incarcerated patients, the office will review and attempt to resolve individual cases while also tracking systemic issues and improvements.

## Information for current dental patients:

For more information on requesting and accessing dental care, please see page 4 (Health Care Emergencies) and page 5 (Dental Care) of the DOC Health Services Orientation Handbook.

### What is a dental **emergency**?

- Visible facial swelling
- Gum swelling with fever
- Difficulty breathing, swallowing, or blurred vision
- Jaw fracture (broken)
- Deep facial cuts, uncontrolled bleeding
- Jaw locked open or closed

### What is **routine** dental care?

- Cleanings
- Fillings
- Dentures
- Bleeding gums (gingivitis)
- Jaw clicking/popping
- Braces (removal only)
- Grinding teeth

### If you need emergency dental care:

#### Declare a dental emergency.

Declared dental emergency evaluations are to rule out life-threatening situations. The dentist will determine the urgency of a patient based on the findings in their clinical evaluation.

### What is **urgent** dental care?

- Exposed nerve
- Abscessed tooth with drainage
- Filling fell out
- Mild pain/cavities
- Cracked/broken tooth
- Loose tooth/teeth

### How do I request a dental appointment?

Request a routine dental appointment by sending a kite (DOC Form 13-423) to DOC Health Services. Request an urgent dental appointment by signing up for sick call or urgent care.

### How do I follow up on a scheduled appointment?

Send a kite to Health Services to ask about a scheduled appointment.

### What is the sick call process?

Use the sign-up sheets that are in your unit for sick call to be seen the following sick call day at the scheduled sick call time. The nurse will come around to each unit and pick up the sick call requests and create a sick call list for those who need to be seen. The clinic also prepares your chart for the appointment. Sign up for Urgent Care if you are at SCCC or CRCC.

### What dental care is available while in DOC custody?

Dental care coverage is detailed in the DOC Health Plan and Health Services Orientation Handbook.

### How can I get access to the DOC Health Plan or Health Services Orientation Handbook?

Send a kite to Health Services to request a copy of the DOC Health Plan and/or the Health Services Orientation Handbook.

### What do I do if I sent a Health Services kite and have not received a response?

If after 10 days you have not received a kite response from Health Services after asking for an appointment or information, file a health services DOC Resolution Request (grievance). Appeal DOC grievance responses to the next level if the issue is not addressed.

**If you have filed a resolution request (grievance) through the Resolution Program and your dental needs are still not being met, call or write to the Office of the Corrections Ombuds to open a new case.**