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Dear Representatives Arrington, Davis, Sewell, and Wenstrup

Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit comments to the *Rural and Underserved Communities Health Task Force*. The Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) is a professional association with approximately 40,000 general dentist members, and seeks to advance general dentistry and oral health through quality continuing education and advocacy.

The AGD would like to respond to the following information request:

What are the main health care-related factors that influence patient outcomes in rural and/or urban underserved areas? Are there additional, systems or factors outside of the health care industry that influence health outcomes within these communities?

The AGD emphasizes the importance of oral health literacy among the general public as a critical step in breaking down barriers to care for rural patients.

Oral health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate oral health decisions.

Oral disease left untreated can result in pain, disfigurement, loss of school and work days, nutrition problems, expensive emergency room use for preventable dental conditions, and even death.

The vast majority of oral health ailments can be avoided by increasing oral health literacy and awareness, with a special emphasis on children to ensure they develop and maintain healthy habits into adulthood. The importance of oral disease prevention in the form of oral health literacy is often overlooked, much to the detriment of our nation's oral health needs.

According to data released by the US Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) as part of its [Healthy People 2020](#) initiative, less than 50% of Americans visit the dentist as recommended. As a baseline for this initiative, data shows that 44.5% of Americans visited the dentist in 2007 and which has dropped to 43.3% in 2016.

Most oral health ailments can be avoided by increasing oral health literacy among all populations, with particular emphasis on children. The AGD supports H.R. 4678, which would amend the Public Health Service Act to direct the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to increase oral health literacy and awareness in specific at-risk populations including: children, pregnant women, elderly, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic and racial minority groups.

Sincerely,