



Dental Therapists Needed to Increase Dental Access in Wisconsin

Leading experts agree, and data confirm that nationally Wisconsin ranks near the bottom in access to dental care for low-income children. The connection between oral health and overall health is well documented and advocates agree allowing dental therapists would improve access to care in our state.

A dental therapist is a licensed oral health professional who works in conjunction with a dental care team under the supervision of a dentist. They provide evaluative, preventive, restorative dental care within their scope of practice. Authorizing dental therapists to a dentist-led team would increase access to dental care for underserved areas in Wisconsin.

There is no silver bullet to fix dental access in Wisconsin. However, more and more states are joining our neighbors in Minnesota who have allowed dental therapists to practice and have well documented the success this change has made. In addition to over 50 countries, dental therapists are currently authorized in Michigan (2018), Arizona (2018), Vermont (2016), Maine (2014), Minnesota (2009), with tribal authorization in Alaska (2003), Washington (2017) and Oregon via state pilot authority (2011). Several other states are currently considering legislation.

There are several important aspects of dental therapy that should be understood.

- 1) **Supervised and Working Collaboratively with a Dentist:** Dental therapists are intended to be a member of the dental team and not work independent of a dentist. A dental therapist must be supervised by a dentist and enter into a collaborative management agreement with a licensed dentist. This allows the therapist and dentist to collaborate on treatment planning and the provision of care. Therapists may work under general supervision which would allow a therapist to provide care when the dentist is not physically present. However, the care would all be authorized by the dentist who sets the terms of the collaborative management agreement.
- 2) **CODA Accredited:** Dental therapists are well trained and educated. The Council on Dental Accreditation (CODA) which is part of the American Dental Association adopted standards for dental therapy education in 2015. CODA is the same body that accredits dental and dental hygiene schools across the country. CODA ensures dental therapy training programs educate their graduates to meet a level of competency in the services which they will be providing.

- 3) **Access is a Problem in Wisconsin:** Rural residents, the elderly and those on Medicaid are hit hardest by hurdles to oral health care. Wisconsin currently has 1.2 million residents who live in dental shortage areas. According to federal statistics, a staggering 64 of the 72 counties in Wisconsin face dentist shortages. Equally as concerning, there are currently over 1 million Wisconsinites who depend on Medicaid for dental benefits that face additional barriers – only 37% of current dentists in the state accept Medicaid patients. Dentist availability plays a major role in why Wisconsin rates 45th of all states in the number of Medicaid children who saw a dentist in 2017.
- 4) **A Solution that Works:** Dental therapists, like physician assistants on a medical team, provide cost-effective preventive and routine restorative care. A 2014 report by the Minnesota Board of Dentistry and Department of Health found that clinics in Minnesota that hired dental therapists were serving more patients and seeing increased revenue; and more than 80 percent of new patients seen by dental therapists were publicly insured. Patients experienced less travel time and decreased wait times. More recent estimates in Minnesota show dental therapists have provided more than 175,000 patient visits since 2017.
- 5) **Educational Infrastructure in Place:** With eight CODA- accredited dental hygiene schools in Wisconsin there is already an educational infrastructure to explore training programs in our state. Dental therapists are being trained at two institutions in Minnesota including the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry and Metropolitan State University (in conjunction with Normandale Community College). Ilisagvik Community College in Alaska has been operating a dental therapy training program for Alaska’s dental therapists since 2016. And Vermont, which passed dental therapy legislation in 2016, launched a dental therapy training program at Vermont Technical College in June 2017.
- 6) **Preventable Harm & Costs:** In Wisconsin more than 41,000 emergency room visits for preventable dental conditions were reported by hospitals in 2015. This represents nearly \$25 million in hospital charges.

It is for these reasons our organizations have formed a coalition to support dental therapy in Wisconsin. Dental therapists will be highly educated, trained, licensed and provide high quality and most importantly much needed care to many in Wisconsin who currently lack access to dental care. We urge you to support legislation this session allowing dental therapy in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Health Insurers
 Prosperity Wisconsin
 Anthem
 Badger Institute
 Children’s Health Alliance of Wisconsin
 Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin
 City of Milwaukee
 Delta Dental
 Disability Rights Wisconsin
 Disability Service Provider Network
 Heartland Institute
 Kids Forward
 Milwaukee Latino Health Coalition
 Oneida Nation of Wisconsin
 Penfield Children’s Center

Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program, Inc. Americans for
 The Arc Wisconsin
 United Community Center
 Waukesha County Community Dental Clinic
 Wisconsin Association of Free & Charitable Clinics
 Wisconsin Association of Health Plans
 Wisconsin Community Action Program Association
 Wisconsin Community Services, Inc.
 Wisconsin Counties Association
 Wisconsin Assisted Living Association
 Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments & Boards
 Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities
 Wisconsin Dental Hygienists’ Association
 Wisconsin Hospital Association
 Wisconsin Oral Health Coalition
 Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association
 Wisconsin Public Health Association