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Dental Therapists: Expanding Access to Oral Health Care

Millions of Americans Do Not Have Access to Dental Care.

Dental problems can lead to serious health risks if they are left untreated. These problems are preventable with regular access to dental care. Unfortunately, millions of Americans do not have access to a dentist, especially low-income families, the elderly, people with disabilities, tribal communities and some communities of color. The barriers that limit access to dental care can be social, cultural, economic and/or geographic.ⁱ **Some states are addressing these barriers by authorizing the use of dental therapists as part of the dental team.**

What is a Dental Therapist?

Dental therapists are highly trained oral health practitioners that work with dental teams similar to the way physicians' assistants work with medical teams.ⁱⁱ Along with providing education and preventive services, they are also able to perform common dental procedures such as filling cavities and, in limited cases, removing teeth.ⁱⁱⁱ Through the off-site supervision of a dentist, dental therapists can also deliver care in settings that better meet the needs of underserved communities such as remote clinics, schools and senior centers. Where employed, dental therapists are enabling dentists and community clinics to see more Medicaid patients, reduce patient wait times and divert emergency room usage. Dental therapists work as part of the existing dental team and may also be dually educated as a dental therapist/dental hygienist.

A Growing Profession.

Dental therapists have been practicing in the U.S. for more than ten years improving access to dental care for underserved communities in Alaska since 2005 and in Minnesota since 2011. They were recently authorized to work in Vermont and Maine. Oregon and Washington have hired dental therapists as part of demonstration projects within tribal communities, and close to a dozen more states are considering authorizing the providers. The Commission on Dental Accreditation has officially recognized dental therapy as a profession and adopted national education standards for dental therapists in 2015.^{iv}

A Cost-Effective Solution.

Dental therapists are a cost-effective way to increase access to critically-needed dental care. Using dental therapists reduces costly emergency room visits, creates good jobs and helps dentists expand their small businesses at no additional cost to the state.

Building a Culturally Competent Workforce.

Dental therapists often work in their home communities allowing them to establish a high level of trust with patients improving their experiences and outcomes. In just over a decade, leaders in Alaska Native communities have built a group of highly skilled American Indian/Alaska Native dental therapists who share the language and culture of the more than 45,000 people they serve.^v

To learn more, contact [Tera Bianchi](mailto:tbianchi@communitycatalyst.org), Project Director, Dental Access Project at Community Catalyst at 617.275.2829 or tbianchi@communitycatalyst.org.

ⁱ Institute of Medicine (2011). Improving access to oral health care for vulnerable and underserved populations. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

ⁱⁱ Nash DA, Friedman JW, Mathu-Muju KR, Robinson PG, Satur J, Moffat S, Kardos R, Lo ECM, Wong AHH, Jaafar N, van den Heuvel K, Phantumvanit P, Chu E, Naidu R, Naidoo L, McKenzie I, Fernando E. A review of the global literature on dental therapists. Community Dent Oral Epidemiol 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dental therapists have some overlap with dental hygienists but also work complementary to them, performing restorative procedures including the drilling and filling of cavities and limited tooth extractions, all under dentist supervision.

^{iv} Commission on Dental Accreditation (2015). Accreditation Standards for Dental Therapy Education Program. Available online at: <http://www.ada.org/~media/CODA/Files/dt.pdf?la=en>

^v In Alaska, 86% of dental therapists are American Indian/Alaska Native vs. 0.2% of dentists nationally.