



**Embargoed until 12:01 a.m.
Thursday, Jan. 5, 2017**

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NATIONAL SURVEY: NEARLY HALF OF VOTERS SAY COST KEEPS THEM FROM GETTING DENTAL CARE; 8 OUT OF 10 WANT ABILITY TO SEE DENTAL THERAPISTS

Dramatic Shortage of Minority Dentists Makes It Harder for Children, Families of Color To Get Dental Care

Boston, Mass.— In a [new survey](#), 45 percent of U.S. voters said they go without needed dental care because of cost or lack of insurance. But eight out of 10 respondents said they favor a way to mitigate this problem: adding midlevel dental providers, such as dental therapists, to dental care teams.

Health care improvement advocate Donald Berwick strongly supports this option.

“Dental therapists can offer much better access to care, for the most underserved populations, at considerably lower cost to the system,” said Berwick, former administrator for the federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. “I have rarely seen a change to the way we provide care that rings truer to the spirit of the Triple Aim, the simultaneous pursuit of improving the patient experience of care, improving the health of populations and reducing the cost of health care.”

Berwick has publicly called on his home state of Massachusetts to join the movement to authorize midlevel dental providers, and a bill that would do that is to be reintroduced for the 2017 legislative session. Dental care is the single most unmet healthcare need in the country.

The [survey](#) by Lake Research Partners found bipartisan support for dental therapists and in every major U.S. region. It also showed support growing from 76 percent in 2011 to 81 percent as of November 2016. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding for the survey.

The [survey](#) indicates people of color face the greatest cost hurdles to dental care. Latino survey respondents were twice as likely as whites or African Americans to report that dentists refused to take their insurance coverage – 21 percent, compared to 10 percent for whites and 11 percent for African Americans.

A study released in November in the journal *Health Affairs* found dramatic shortages of minority dentists, making it harder for people of color to get dental care. The study, led by Beth Mertz, associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco, estimated that an additional 19,714 Black dentists, 31,214 Hispanic or Latino dentists and 2,825 American Indian or Alaska Native dentists are needed to eliminate national shortages of minority dentists.

“The burden of oral disease falls hardest on children and families of color. Since our founding in 1930, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has made improving oral health for children and families a priority, working with communities and dental professionals to spark innovations for increasing access to and improving oral health,” said Alice Warner-Mehlhorn, director of policy for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “Across the country, states must do everything in their power to prevent more children from falling through the cracks in the current dental delivery system. That includes diversifying the dental workforce and adding dental therapists to dental teams.”

In 2016, tribes in Washington and Oregon launched pilot projects with dental therapists and close to a dozen other states are looking to authorize them to practice. One year ago, the Swinomish became the first tribe in the Lower 48 to use dental therapists to address the oral health crisis in Indian Country.

Dental therapist programs are designed to help expand access to dental care in underserved communities. In Alaska, they have increased access to 45,000 Alaska Natives who could not get regular dental care before. In Minnesota, dental therapists have significantly increased care for underserved patients. Despite more than a decade of success in the U.S., out-of-date laws prevent dental therapists from employment in most states.

“Good oral health is critical to overall health, yet policies to expand access to dental care do not reflect this,” said Tera Bianchi, project director of the Dental Access Project at Community Catalyst. “Dental therapists offer better access to care for the most underserved populations in a cost-effective way to the system. They are a smart, effective bipartisan way to improve access to care.”

Lake Research Partners, a public policy and opinion research firm, conducted a telephone survey of 2,400 voters nationwide. The [survey](#) has a margin of error among adults overall of +/-2.0% at the 95% confidence interval.

Community Catalyst is a national, non-profit consumer advocacy organization founded in 1998 with the belief that affordable quality health care should be accessible to everyone. We work in partnership with national, state and local organizations, policymakers, and philanthropic foundations to ensure consumer interests are represented wherever important decisions about health and the health system are made: in communities, courtrooms, statehouses and on Capitol Hill. For more information, visit www.communitycatalyst.org. Read our blog at <http://blog.communitycatalyst.org>. Follow us on Twitter @HealthPolicyHub.