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Increasing Access to Dental Care by Expanding the Dental Team to Include the Practice of Dental Therapists

With the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), policymakers have made it clear that oral health is a high priority. The oral health provisions included in ACA, coupled with dental insurance coverage expansions contained in Children's Health Insurance Protection Reauthorization Act, will ensure that every child has access to dental insurance. Covering the estimated 5.3 million currently uninsured children who will obtain coverage as a result of the reforms will place additional strains on a dental care delivery system that lacks the workforce large enough to provide dental care to every community. Dental therapists offer the opportunity to enhance the dental workforce and bring quality, affordable dental care to every community.

An inadequate workforce: the scope of the problem

Oral health is essential to overall health, yet millions of Americans go without needed dental care due to a shortage of providers who serve rural and low-income populations as well as a lack of affordable dental care options.

- Nearly 50 million people in more than 4,000 federally designated dental shortage areas lack access to a dentist for routine oral health care.
- Millions more who have access to a dentist cannot afford one. A 2003 American Dental Association (ADA) survey found that more than half of adults who said they had not seen a dentist in the past five years cited high costs as a major reason.
- Nearly 9,700 new dental practitioners are needed to overcome our nation's dental care shortage. Meanwhile, the number of active dentists in the U.S. is estimated to decline over the next decade, further compounding the problem.

An innovative approach to addressing the problem: expand the dental workforce

Included in the ACA, Congress created an alternative dental provider demonstration designed to foster at least 15 demonstration projects. These projects could be crucial to identifying innovative ways to expand access to people most in need. **As policymakers begin to explore using alternative oral health providers to increase access to dental care in these 15 demonstration projects, it is important to note that:**

- An alternative dental workforce program has been operating in Alaska since 2003, when the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium launched a program to allow dental therapists to perform routine dental services in remote areas of the state. **The program successfully increased access to care and now serves over 35,000 previously underserved Alaskan natives.**
- In 2009, the Minnesota legislature created a dental therapist program to address oral care issues. Training programs are already in place and safety-net providers are looking forward to working with the new dental therapists to increase their capacity to treat the currently underserved Medicaid population. The first graduates are beginning to practice in underserved communities.

- The American Association of Public Health Dentistry, supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, convened a panel of dental educators that established a model curriculum for dental therapists, a career ladder training program for dental hygienists.
- States such as Kansas, Washington, New Mexico, Vermont, Ohio, New Hampshire, Connecticut, California, and Maine are taking the lead in identifying how dental therapists could increase access to dental care.
- In Oregon, the Legislature passed a law last year to establish pilot project for alternative dental providers. Efforts are underway to establish pilots in the coming year.

Increasing access: how dental therapists can expand the reach of dentists to underserved communities

Community Catalyst and the Kellogg Foundation are working with five states – Kansas, Ohio, New Mexico, Washington, and Vermont – to explore establishing dental therapist programs to expand access to oral health care. The Pew Center on the States is also working in three other states. We are committed to improving oral health for children and adults who currently lack access to dental care.

Internationally and in Alaska, dental therapists have a history of successfully expanding high-quality care to underserved children and families as part of a comprehensive system of care managed by dentists.

- Dental therapists work under the general supervision of a dentist, performing routine and preventive care.
- Tremendous opportunities exist for increasing the reach of dentists: according to the ADA, 75 percent of services provided by dentists and 79 percent of services provided by pediatric dentists could be delegated to dental therapists working under the general supervision of dentists.
- Nearly a century of experience and research in more than 50 countries has established the quality of care provided by dental therapists.

All Americans deserve access to local, affordable dental care. For many, dentists alone cannot meet that need. We must expand the dental care workforce and explore alternative models for providing oral health care.

Workforce Resources

Extensive research demonstrates the need for an expanded dental workforce and the quality of care provided by dental therapists.

WKKF's Report on Training New Dental Health Providers, <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2010/Training-New-Dental-Health-Providers-in-the-U-S-Full-Report.aspx>

The Pew Center on the State's Report on the Cost of Delay, <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2010/The-Pew-Center-on-the-States-The-Cost-of-Delay.aspx>

The Pew Center on the State's Help Wanted Report, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Dental_Report_Help_Wanted.pdf