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WASHINGTON BECOMES LATEST STATE TO JOIN DENTAL THERAPY MOVEMENT

Washington Governor Inslee Signs Bill Allowing Tribal Communities to Hire Dental Therapists

Olympia, WA – Today, Washington Governor Jay Inslee signed into law a bill that will make it easier for Native American families to get dental care in their own communities. The Washington state “Act Relating to Dental Health Services in Tribal Settings” is the latest step in a growing movement to add midlevel dental providers to dental teams.

The movement is accelerating as the dental profession, state and tribal governments struggle to make dental care available and affordable to families. States and tribes are authorizing midlevel dental providers, known as dental therapists, to help millions of U.S. residents get dental care. Dental therapists practice in Alaska, Minnesota and Washington and were recently approved in Maine and Vermont, as well as in pilot initiatives in Oregon. Several other states are actively seeking to authorize dental therapists, including: Kansas, Ohio, Massachusetts, Michigan and New Mexico.

“We applaud Washington state and tribal leaders for taking action to fix a dental system that has not met the needs for a third of the people in this country for decades now,” said Tera Bianchi, project director of the Dental Access Project at Community Catalyst, an advocacy organization committed to making quality health care available to everyone. “Dental therapists are proven to expand the reach of dentists, making dental care available to underserved populations in a cost effective way. They are a smart, effective bipartisan way to improve access to care.”

Forty-six million people live in dental shortage areas, and millions more cannot afford care. Dental care is the single most unmet health need in the country and tooth decay is the number one chronic condition for children. Left untreated, it is highly infectious and debilitating, can threaten their ability to learn, and lead to life-threatening infections.

The new Washington state law authorizes federally certified or tribally licensed dental therapists to practice in Indian Country in Washington state. It cements an effort launched a year ago by the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community to hire a dental therapist to begin practicing there despite the fact that they were not yet authorized by state law. The tribe hired Dental Therapist Daniel Kennedy, claiming their sovereign right to provide health care providers of their choosing.

The new law is a green light for other tribes in Washington to follow the Swinomish. “We have one dentist to see more than 6,000 patients on the Colville Indian Reservation,” said Mel Tonasket, vice-chairman of the Colville Confederated Tribes. “This law will help us hire a dental therapist to make sure our people are getting the oral health care they need.”

In one year, Kennedy has helped the busy Swinomish dental clinic reduce wait times from three months to sometimes less than three weeks. Kennedy is also teaching preschool children to practice healthy oral health care habits.

Dental therapists have been practicing effectively in 50 other countries for decades. The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium established a dental therapy network in Alaska a dozen years ago after exhausting efforts to retain dentists in remote communities. As a result, 45,000 Alaska Natives now have access to dental care and the dental therapy program has generated 76 full time jobs with a net economic effect of \$9.7M, one-third of which is spent in rural Alaska. In Minnesota, dental therapists have provided care to thousands of new patients, the majority of patients enrolled in public programs, and significantly reduced wait times.

Dental therapists are highly-trained, mid-level providers. They work as part of a team, supervised by a dentist either remotely or on site. They offer routine and preventive services ranging from cleaning teeth to providing fillings and, on a limited basis, removing decayed teeth. Washington’s new law enables Medicaid and federal funding reimbursement for services provided by dental therapists.

“Oral health care is a central pillar to a child’s overall health, so today we celebrate the action taken by Washington state to expand oral health care for children and their families in every tribal community,” said La June Montgomery Tabron, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “We appreciate the leadership of Governor Inslee, State Representative David Sawyer, Swinomish Tribal Chairman Brian Cladoosby, and State Senator John McCoy alongside countless others who have been steadfast in their efforts to advance racial equity while simultaneously creating new workforce opportunities.”

While this new law addresses Indian Country in Washington, the momentum for dental therapy is continuing across the United States.

The Kellogg Foundation has helped fund the dental therapy initiative alongside numerous tribes and state-based coalitions, partnering with Community Catalyst and others to improve the delivery of oral health care.

For more information about dental therapy, please visit <http://www.communitycatalyst.org/>.

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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.