

Dental Therapists Are Right for Washington

Good for our health, good for our economy



Washington
DENTAL ACCESS
Campaign

? Can everyone in Washington get dental care when they need it? For too many Washingtonians, **the answer is no.** Across the state, our dental care system is failing children and working parents in low-income families and communities of color, elderly people in nursing homes, people with special needs, and people who live in rural and Tribal communities. Thirty-four of our 39 counties don't have enough dental professionals to meet the need.

? What are dental therapists? Dental therapists are oral health care providers who work as part of the dental team in much the same way that nurse practitioners work as part of the medical team. They provide preventive and routine care, including some restorations and extractions.

? How will dental therapists help more Washingtonians get dental care? Dental therapists will bring dental care to communities. In addition to working in dentists' offices, they can work in schools, nursing homes, and community health centers. They would expand dentists' and health clinics' capacity to see more patients, especially those who struggle to afford oral health care.

Evidence shows that dental therapists are very effective at getting dental care to people in rural communities, to children covered by Medicaid, and to people with low incomes.

In Washington, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community has hired a dental therapist to provide better access to dental care. In doing so, the Swinomish are taking the lead in reversing longstanding oral health disparities and improving oral health not only among their own Tribal members but across Indian Country.

? Are dental therapists safe? Absolutely. Dental therapists have been practicing in the United States for more than 10 years without a single adverse patient event. In fact, a 2013 American Dental Association study recognized that "appropriately trained mid-level providers are capable of providing high-quality service" and that dental teams with dental therapists treat tooth decay more successfully than teams without them.

? What impact will dental therapists have on Washington's economy? Dental therapists give dentists and community health clinics an opportunity to expand their business. With a dental therapist on staff, a dental practice can schedule 2,000 to 3,000 more appointments per year. Dental therapists cost less than 30 cents to employ for every dollar they generate.



Children's Dental Services, a non-profit dental practice in Minnesota employing dental therapists since 2011, reports that:

- In 2011-2012, dental therapists provided care to more than 2,000 patients, of whom 84 percent were enrolled in Medicaid, 15 percent were uninsured, and 1 percent or less were privately insured.
- Employing dental therapists for \$45 an hour compared to dentists at \$75 an hour allowed the practice to maintain and expand services in the face of declining Medicaid reimbursement rates.
- Each dental therapist saves Children's Dental Services \$1,200 a week.
- The dental therapist model is working so well that Children's Dental Services is paying the tuition for two of its current employees to become dental therapists and offering it to a third.

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