



Innovative bill could relieve Olympic Peninsula's oral health crisis

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OLYMPIA—House Bill 1421, co-sponsored by Rep. Steve Tharinger (D-Dungeness), would create new dental therapists to provide urgently needed dental services on the Olympic Peninsula and in other areas across the state where oral health care is hard to get.

Tharinger's district, which encompasses Clallam and Jefferson and includes most of Grays Harbor counties, contains one of the state's eight federally designated dental health professional shortage areas.

Transportation challenges, poverty and lack of dentists who accept Apple Health and Apple Health for Kids all add up to this district featuring the worst access to oral health care in the state. Here, fewer than 1 in 10 adults using Apple Health saw a dentist in 2013. Even among kids ages 5 and under assisted by the state's ABCD program, only 1 in 3 used a dental service in 2013.

On the north Olympic Peninsula and in other areas across the state, kids and families can't find a dentist who will treat them.

House Bill 1421 would educate a new generation of oral health care professionals, called dental therapists. Similar to a nurse practitioner or physician assistant, a Dental therapist can put affordable care within reach of more people. Adding dental therapists to the workforce is a cost-effective way to use state resources more efficiently and improve the health of kids and families.

"Dental therapists allow every member of the dental team to maximize their efficiency and deliver more care to more people," says Rep. Tharinger. "Our busy health clinics can bring in more providers to serve the needs of more families in my home district."

Residents of the north Olympic Peninsula have the WORST access to dental care in the entire state. That means:

Three to four times as many preschoolers are in need of treatment;

Nine out of 10 Medicaid (Apple Health) adult enrollees can't find a dentist who will see them.

“We have an oral health access crisis on the North Olympic Peninsula,” says Dr. Tom Locke, health officer for Clallam and Jefferson Counties. “Good oral health is a crucial part of overall health. We are not serving the need that exists for basic dental care, resulting in a significant amount of preventable suffering and disability. Dental therapists can help.”

Oral health is vital to overall health. A healthy mouth helps us to eat well, stay productive at work and pay attention in school. Untreated tooth disease can affect a child for life, impeding learning and proper physical and social development. Poor oral health can also lead to diabetes, stroke and heart disease.

Children from low-income families are 44 percent more likely to have tooth decay by third grade than children from middle- to high-income families. Black, Latino and Native children are 18 percent more likely to have untreated tooth decay than their white peers.

The consequences of lack of care can even be fatal; in 2012, a Lacey man died from lack of preventive treatment of an abscessed tooth.

Dental therapists put affordable care within reach of more people. They:

- Expand dental care access to families and communities;
- Save money by providing high quality routine, cost-effective care and preventing dental emergencies;
- Support stronger communities by creating family wage jobs and ensuring good oral health for everyone.

In the practice setting, dental therapists cost only \$0.30 for every dollar they generate. This allows dentists to see more Medicaid patients at existing Apple Health reimbursement rates. Six out of every 10 children in Clallam, Jefferson and Grays Harbor counties are covered by Apple Health for Kids (i.e., Medicaid), yet 4 out of 5 dentists don't accept Apple Health.

Dental therapists are already at work in Alaska, Minnesota and in practice settings in other countries across the globe. Since introducing dental therapists two years ago, a solo-practice dentist in rural Minnesota now takes 38 percent more patients. The practice increased the number of Medicaid patients served by 73 percent.

House Bill 1421 was introduced into the House Health Care and Wellness Committee on Tuesday, Jan. 20. Both Rep. Tharinger and Rep. Kevin Van de Wege (D-Sequim) are members of the committee.

For more on the oral health care crisis and the dental therapist solution, visit www.wadentalaccess.com.

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