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Swinomish awarded for dental care advocacy

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Anyone trying to make an appointment at the Swinomish Dental Office today would have to wait five to six weeks before landing time in the dental chair.

Meanwhile, cavities or other oral health problems could become bigger and harder to treat.

"We can take care of you, but not in a timely manner," said Raymond Dailey, dental chief at the Swinomish and Upper Skagit tribes. "There's more need than we can provide care for."

That's why the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community made an award-winning effort to expand routine dental care in the state — and they say they will continue.

The Swinomish were awarded a Voices for Children award in Seattle last week by the Children's Alliance, which has been part of the statewide fight to extend dental care to more people.

The Washington Dental Access Campaign has been lobbying the Legislature to allow licensed dental practitioners to work in Washington. The mid-level dental practitioners would perform routine procedures, such as fillings, freeing up dentists for more complicated tasks, including root canals, extractions and denture work, Dailey said.

Currently, only Alaska allows licensed dental practitioners, but five states are working toward allowing them, Dailey said.

He predicts a dental practitioner would be able to provide half of a dental office's services.

"It allows me to care for patients with much bigger needs," Dailey said.

Dailey traveled to Alaska to see how the dental practitioners work there and went to Olympia with tribal Chairman Brian Cladoosby to advocate a bill that would allow the profession in the state.

The Senate bill passed out of the Senate Health and Long-Term Care Committee, but did not pass the Rules Committee for a Senate vote before the Feb. 14 deadline, according to the Children's Alliance.

But the Dental Access Campaign will continue every year until a bill passes the Legislature.

"We keep getting closer and closer," Dailey said.

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