

## Could dental therapists be the answer to long waits for dentists in Wisconsin?

David Wahlberg | Wisconsin State Journal

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Joseph Merit gets a dental checkup at Access Community Health Centers in Dodgeville, with hygienist Abby Douglas, left, and dentist Dr. Paula Duszynski. Mid-level workers called dental therapists, proposed under a bill before the state Legislature, would expand access for underserved patients, supporters say. AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

**W**hen Joseph Merit's teeth became infected, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth and limiting his diet to soft foods, he said most dentists wouldn't see him because he's on Medicaid.

"I couldn't find any dentists who would take me," said Merit, 72, a former dairy farmer from Lancaster. "I had it real bad."

Through Access Community Health Centers' dental clinic in Dodgeville, Merit had his remaining six upper teeth pulled, got six fillings in his bottom teeth and was fitted for a full upper denture and partial lower denture. He's back to chewing meat, peanuts and popcorn.

"They've done a wonderful job taking care of me," he said. "I can eat so much now."

Access and other dental clinics that treat Wisconsin's low-income patients say they can't recruit enough dentists to meet demand. They say dental therapists, mid-level providers who can fill cavities, do oral exams and pull some teeth, could help them see more of the patients who linger on waiting lists.

Under a bill proposed Thursday, Wisconsin would **join 13 states, including Michigan and Minnesota**, in authorizing dental therapists. Similar bills have been before the state Legislature **at least three times before**. The Wisconsin Dental Association, or WDA, **dropped its opposition to the idea** two years ago after some restrictions were added. The new bill includes essentially the same restrictions, and the group remains neutral.



Dentist Paula Duszynski checks Joseph Merit's remaining teeth at a recent checkup. Merit, 72, of Lancaster, had several teeth pulled and got dentures through Access Community Health Centers in Dodgeville after some of his teeth became infected.

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Dental therapists, whose level of care is between that of dentists and dental hygienists, work much like physician assistants do with doctors and nurses. They couldn't do complex procedures such as root canals. Many of them previously worked as hygienists.

"A dental therapist could be used for all of the primary care, and dentists could do more comprehensive treatments, like root canals, crowns, dentures and implants," said Dr. Tina Sopiwnik, a dentist who is chief dental officer at Ashland-based NorthLakes Community Clinic, which offers dental care at nine of its 16 sites in northern Wisconsin.

NorthLakes, which like Access gets a federal grant to treat people on Medicaid or without insurance, has 13 dentists. It could use at least seven more, especially in locations such as Hayward, Hurley, Iron River and Lakewood, Sopiwnik said. If dental therapists were available, they could fill some of those slots, she said.



Dental hygienist Abby Douglas reminded Joseph Merit to brush his teeth and gums and remove his full upper denture at night. "We want to let your gums breathe," she said during Merit's recent checkup and teeth cleaning.

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Family Health Center of Marshfield, a federally funded clinic that provides dental care at 10 sites in central and northern Wisconsin, has 34 dentists and needs about 50, administrators say. All of the sites need another provider, and several could use two or more, including Black River Falls and Park Falls, said Tena Springer, director of dental operations.

Dental therapists “could assist the dentists that are there, to help stretch their effectiveness,” Springer said.

## Bill requirements

Under the bill, sponsored by state Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Irma, and state Rep. Jon Plumer, R-Lodi, dental therapists would have to work in dental health professional shortage areas or see mostly underserved patients, such as those on Medicaid. They’d have to graduate from accredited training programs. After working 2,000 hours under a dentist’s supervision, they could work more independently through collaborative agreements with dentists.

“Providing dental practices the option to include these well-trained dental professionals in their dental teams will allow for increased access, lower practice costs, and savings for the state, all without compromising quality of care,” Felzkowski and Plumer said in a memo seeking co-sponsors.



Joseph Merit's caregiver, Laura Murphy, helps him leave Access Community Health Centers in Dodgeville after a teeth cleaning and checkup. Merit, a former dairy farmer from Lancaster, said other dentists wouldn't see him because he's on Medicaid.

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Dr. Patrick Tepe, a dentist in Verona who is chair of WDA's legislative advocacy committee, said dentists still have mixed opinions on the idea. Dental therapists could help in public health settings like the federally funded clinics, he said. But if many hygienists train to become therapists, it could exacerbate the hygienist shortage, he said.

"We already have a huge shortage of hygienists across the state," Tepe said.

Marquette University, which runs the state's only dental school, was the main opponent to the bill last session. In June, it named a new dean, Dr. Elsbeth Kalenderian. She has worked in Europe, where dental therapists are more widely used.

Meanwhile, a **bill to allow another type of mid-level health care provider** — advanced practice nurses — to work more independently **passed the state Senate last month**. The Wisconsin Medical Society and other doctor groups remain opposed. They want nurse practitioners and other advanced practice nurses to work longer with doctors before becoming independent and say advanced practice nurses who operate pain clinics apart from hospitals should be required to collaborate with pain medicine doctors.

## Medicaid challenge

With dental care, the main challenge is access to care for patients on Medicaid, or BadgerCare. Most dentists don't participate in the state's Medicaid program, saying it doesn't pay enough to cover their costs.

Just **37.9% of Wisconsin dentists work with Medicaid** or the federal Children's Health Insurance Program, compared with 43% nationally, according to the American Dental Association's Health Policy Institute. The state's Medicaid payments for children are **33.6% of what dentists say they get paid from private insurance**, compared with 61.4% nationally, the ADA institute says. For adults, it's 33% in the state and 53.3% nationally.

Madison-based Access offers dental care at four of its five clinics, including dental-only sites in Dodgeville and Sun Prairie. It has 15 dentists, including one who focuses on **Celebrate Smiles, which provides dental sealants**, fluoride varnish and other services for children at Madison and Sun Prairie schools. Access could use four more dental providers, including one in Dodgeville, said Dr. Errin Pfeifer, chief dental officer.

If dental therapists were available, the Dodgeville opening might potentially be filled by a dental therapist instead of a dentist, Pfeifer said.

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"The need is great for dental care," she said. "If there is another piece of the puzzle in the workforce that is validated, trained and accredited ... it makes sense."

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Many dental therapists in states that allow them previously were dental hygienists. Abby Douglas, a hygienist, cleaned Joseph Merit's teeth recently at Access Community Health Centers in Dodgeville.

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Merit said anything to expand dental care access, especially in rural parts of the state, would help.

After giving up his dairy farm years ago, he worked in Lancaster making candy wrappers, driving a nursing home laundry truck and doing maintenance at a hotel. Without easy access to dentists, he neglected his teeth, even after they became infected. A social worker connected him with Access.

"There's a lot of people out there who can't afford dental insurance," he said. "I hope there is better access for people who are poor, especially farmers and their families."

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