



OHIO DENTAL ASSOCIATION

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Date: April 14, 2020

To: Members of the Ohio House of Representatives Economic Recovery Task Force

From: Sharon Parsons, DDS – ODA President
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Re: Reopening Dental Offices and Allowing Full Dental Treatment for Ohioans

As the State of Ohio begins the process of restarting its economy and re-opening Ohio's businesses, on behalf of the 5,300 member dentists of the Ohio Dental Association, we urge you to include as part of the plan the lifting of the order requiring the delay of all elective surgeries and procedures.

As you know, in order to preserve personal protective equipment (PPE) for the fight against the coronavirus, on March 18, the State of Ohio directed all health care providers, including Ohio's dentists, to delay all non-essential procedures and surgeries. All dental offices were practically shut down overnight, only opening occasionally to provide emergency dental surgery to their patients to keep them out of hospital emergency rooms which are dealing with coronavirus patients. While the need for PPE is understandable in order to ensure front line health care workers are protected in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the state's Order has had a devastating impact on Ohio's dental practices and a detrimental impact on the oral health of Ohioans. As PPE becomes more available, with additional production and importation of equipment and supplies, and the expansion of the ability to disinfect masks and other protective wear, the Order to delay these important health care procedures should be lifted.

Impact on Dental Practices

While the current coronavirus pandemic has created difficulties for many small businesses in Ohio, it has been devastating for Ohio's small business dental offices. A recent American Dental Association survey of dentists shows that during the current pandemic situation, in treating dental emergencies only, the typical dental office is seeing less than 5% of its normal patient visits. Working from home is not an option for dentists and their staff who perform procedures that must be done in person. This has created a devastating reality for dental offices. Because dental practices remain on call to treat emergencies in order to keep patients out of pain and from seeking care at hospital ERs, they still incur

significant overhead expenses – including maintaining equipment and at least some staff – while generating next to no revenue.

There are more than 7,000 licensed dentists in Ohio and an estimated 4,500 dental practices in Ohio. Nearly 30,000 Ohioans work in dental offices across the state, including dentists, dental hygienists, assistants and front desk personnel. All of them have been significantly negatively impacted by this crisis. In normal times, dentists work in every community in Ohio, including in rural communities throughout the state, providing quality oral health care and employment opportunities. These small business dental offices, which work with high overhead because of the cost of equipment, materials, and staff, and narrow margins, are now teetering on the brink of insolvency. The state of Ohio cannot allow the destruction of the dental delivery system. These dentists are doing their part to assist with the coronavirus crisis by temporarily shutting down their businesses except for emergencies in order to preserve PPE per the State's order. As soon as possible, these practices must be allowed to open up and provide the full range of treatment that Ohioans need.

Impact on Dental Patients and all Ohioans

Moreover, the Order to delay non-emergency dental care is having a negative impact on Ohioans' oral and overall health. For example,

- Delay in prevention, diagnosis and treatment of dental disease will lead to more invasive and expensive procedures and oral surgery.
- Normally, approximately three Ohioans are diagnosed with oral cancer every day. Most of the time detection is through regular visits to the dentist. Delay in detecting and diagnosing oral cancer can lead to catastrophic consequences including serious oral surgery and other cancer treatments and even death.
- Undiagnosed and untreated periodontal (gum) disease has been associated with a number of systemic health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and pregnancy complications.

Lifting the Order delaying these procedures will allow dentists to diagnose and treat important dental conditions that will preserve Ohioans' oral and overall health.

Solution: Opening Dental Practices to Provide Full Dental Treatment

By allowing dentists to reopen their practices to provide the full range of necessary treatment, these dental offices will be able to restore their employees and provide the necessary oral health services Ohioans need. In opening up dental practices, Ohio's dentists are prepared to take special precautions to limit patient interactions with each other and potential exposure to coronavirus, including having a detailed questionnaire/conversation before scheduling appointments, taking the temperature of the patient at the outset, staggering patient appointments to reduce waiting room exposure and having patients wait in their cars instead of waiting areas (with text or call notification when the dental

chair is ready). Dentists will also secure the equipment and supplies necessary to provide treatment in a safe and efficient environment for their staff and patients.

Additional Policy Initiatives for Dental Offices

In addition to opening dental offices, dentists desperately need state assistance and policy initiatives to recover from this financial shock and to assist patients. This need could be met by the following public policy initiatives:

- The State should provide a state income tax credit of up to \$5,000 for every dentist owner in Ohio (Every dental practice has lost far more than that during this crisis)
- The State should provide assistance through grants and low interest loans for dental offices so they can get through the shutdown and reopen after the crisis. Currently, JobsOhio Loan and Grants program provides assistance to certain businesses to assist with things like land acquisition, construction, renovation, and equipment purchase. A similar program should be available for dentists to recover at least a portion of their lost income so they can rehire staff, pay bills, and get their businesses up and running again once the governor lifts his order essentially shutting down dental practices except for emergencies.
- Dental practices must be included in any state assistance that is made available to any other Ohio small businesses in light of the special role dentists have been asked to play in this crisis – essentially shutting down in order to free up PPE.
- The General Assembly should pass Senate Bill 148, the dental non-covered services legislation modeled after similar legislation enacted in the last General Assembly related to vision care services. SB 148 would prevent dental insurers from interfering with the dentist- patient relationship on elective procedures that have been delayed due to the State of Ohio's Order.
- Dentists should be authorized to administer newly developed tests to determine whether a person has developed COVID-19 antibodies. Dental offices exist in every community in Ohio and such serology testing will be crucial to quickly reopening the economy and will help determine whether patients are eligible to donate plasma for Covid-19 treatments. The results of the testing may also benefit patients as they get dental and other health care services by giving providers important information to determine the appropriate precautions (related to PPE, etc.)

Conclusion

The dentists of Ohio understand the gravity of the situation related to the coronavirus pandemic and have done their part to assist in the state's efforts, along with many other Ohioans. Ohio's dentists have basically shut down their practices (only treating emergencies) at significant cost to themselves and their employees. They have treated emergencies in order to keep patients from

presenting at the hospital ERs at a time when hospitals need to focus on treating coronavirus patients and other emergencies. Ohio dentists have donated excess PPE to ensure their health care colleagues on the front lines are protected when treating COVID-19 patients. Now, as Ohio looks to restart its economy, Ohio's dentists are prepared and asking to go back to work in order generate economic activity, restore their employees, and, most importantly, provide Ohioans the oral health care services they need.