

February 1, 2019

The Honorable Robin Weisz  
North Dakota House of Representatives  
600 E. Boulevard Avenue  
Bismarck, ND 58505

**RE: House Bill 1426 and Dental Therapy for North Dakota's Tribes**

Dear Chairman Weisz:

On behalf of the National Indian Health Board (NIHB), the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), and the 573 federally recognized Tribes we serve, we write to you in strong support of House Bill 1426, which would authorize dental therapists to practice in the state of North Dakota. This legislation would help Tribes address an oral health crisis among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). We thank you for holding a hearing on this legislation in the Human Services Committee on January 21, 2019.

According to the Indian Health Service (IHS) 2014 report, "The Oral Health of American Indian and Alaska Native Children Aged 1-5 Years: Results of the 2014 IHS Oral Health Survey," AI/AN children have on average four times more oral health disease than white children nationwide. The increased decay at such a young age often requires treatment under general anesthesia, which the agency estimates costs over \$6,000 per child. Another survey conducted in 2016 by IHS found that AI/AN children in that age group were an astounding five times more likely than the average child to have untreated cavities in permanent teeth.

Indian Country also suffers from a provider shortage. On average there is one dentist for every 1,500 people. But in Indian Country, there is only one dentist for every 2,800 people meaning that Indian Country has half the dentists per capita than the national average. In a survey of Tribal leaders and health directors in Indian Country conducted by the National Indian Health Board, one director from North Dakota reported that for his Tribe the average wait time between making an appointment and being seen was an astounding three months! Another North Dakota Tribal health director said that his dentist is overworked due to the sheer volume of patients.

Dental therapists have a long history of success addressing these issues in Indian Country. Alaska Tribes were the first in the United States to utilize dental therapists in 2004. Since that time, according to a 2017 study conducted by the University of Washington, communities served by a dental therapist saw a 60% increase in the number of preventative oral health services in children and a 74% reduction in the number of front teeth extractions in children<sup>1</sup>.

Tribes in Washington and Oregon also employ dental therapists. While these Tribes experienced long wait times before hiring dental therapists, both Swinomish and Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribes

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<sup>1</sup> Dental Utilization for Communities Served by Dental Therapists in Alaska's Yukon Kuskokwim Delta: Findings from an Observational Quantitative Study. Donald Chi, DDS, PhD. University of Washington. August 2017.

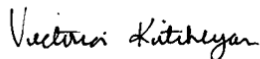
report their wait times are almost effectively eliminated thanks to their dental therapists. Due to an increase in the number of patients seen and the additional provider, Swinomish is now in the process of expanding its dental clinic.

Dentists in Minnesota have employed dental therapists in that state since 2011. In all that time, not one substantial complaint related to a dental therapist's performance has been filed with the state. In fact, dental therapists are so safe and reliable that their malpractice insurance is only \$93 a year!

It is due to this record of success that all five Tribes in North Dakota have passed resolutions of support of dental therapy.

Arizona and Michigan recently passed dental therapy laws, and Tribes in those states will begin employing dental therapists as soon as possible. It is our hope that North Dakota Tribes will soon be able to join them and others in addressing their unmet oral health needs. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the National Indian Health Board if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and your attention to this issue.

Yours in Health,



Victoria Kitcheyan  
Acting Chairwoman  
National Indian Health Board



Jefferson Keel  
President  
National Congress of American Indians