

May 19, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and  
Education Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Roy Blunt  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and  
Education Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Murray and Ranking Member Blunt:

We write to you today to urge Congress to support states that are seeking to expand their oral health workforce with dental therapists. Specifically, we ask that you exclude any language in the FY2022 Labor HHS Appropriations bills that would prohibit states or tribal communities from accessing health workforce grants to expand their oral health workforce through dental therapy programs.

Across the states, support for dental therapy has been bipartisan and diverse. President Biden endorsed the expansion of dental therapists in his [campaign platform](#) and the Trump Administration [promoted](#) them as well. Recognizing the potential of dental therapists to improve access to dental care, Congress created a grant program<sup>1</sup> to support the training and development of dental providers like dental therapists in 2010. However, this grant program has never been funded because every Labor HHS Appropriations bill over the last ten years has included language that prohibits HRSA from funding it, effectively limiting the ability of states and tribes to test and deploy alternative dental provider models as they see fit.

Dental care is out of reach for many Americans. Almost [60 million Americans](#) live in areas without enough dental providers and almost one-third of adults report having [skipped dental care due to cost](#). Moreover, access to dental care in programs like Medicaid remains inconsistent as the availability and comprehensiveness of optional adult dental benefits varies widely from state to state and fewer than half of dentists [accept Medicaid](#) at all, leaving many families without access to care even if they do have coverage. Due to these barriers, oral health has become one of the most visible examples of health disparities in America. Good oral health is taken for granted by many Americans but remains out of reach for low-income families, communities of color, Tribal communities, and many rural Americans. Bad teeth are not just a visible reminder of the inequities in our oral health system, they [affect](#) overall health, performance in school and earning potential.

In order to address this crisis and the growing divide, it is critical to support the expansion of the dental workforce to include dental therapists. Across the country, more and more states are authorizing dental therapists to address growing unmet need, and ensure that every community has access to dental care. Unfortunately, many of these states lack the federal support needed to expand their oral health workforce.

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative dental health care provider demonstration program (PHSA Sec. 340G-1).

Dental therapists are licensed providers who play a similar role in dentistry to that of physician assistants in medicine and work under the supervision of a dentist to provide routine dental care like exams and fillings. Using telehealth to collaborate with their supervising dentist, dental therapists can bring care to people where they are, including schools, nursing homes and rural communities. And because their employment cost is, on average, one-third to one-half the amount of a dentist, hiring dental therapists is a cost-effective way for safety-net clinics to stretch their budget to treat more patients. A number of colleges are building education programs in partnership with rural communities, communities of color and Tribal communities to create an accessible pathway for people from areas with little access to oral health care to become the dental providers their communities need. For the first time, these communities are having regular access to dental care from someone who is part of their community.

Dental therapists have been working in the U.S. for over 15 years and have a proven track record of high-quality care. To be clear, dental therapy education programs are accredited by the same body that accredits education programs for dentists. Currently, dental therapists are working or authorized in at least some settings in 12 states, seven more states have had legislation introduced this year to authorize them and many more are considering legislation.

States with Dental Therapists Working/Authorized	States with Active Legislation This Year
AK, AZ, CT, ID, ME, MI, MN, NM, NV, OR, VT, WA	FL, IN, KS, MA, NJ, NY, WI

We ask you to end this discriminatory ban on funding and allow states to leverage federal workforce grant programs in support of proven, community-driven dental therapy programs. It is important that Congress puts its trust in the communities on the ground to pursue this workforce model as intended. Lifting the ban and fully funding this grant program would do just that. It would not merely accelerate the implementation of dental therapists, but more importantly, make important strides in oral health equity and increase access to care for communities that face the highest barriers to oral health.

We urge you to help the communities you represent expand their oral health workforces by providing the necessary support for dental therapists.

Sincerely,

*National Organizations:*

American Association for Community Dental Programs  
 American Dental Hygienists' Association  
 American Dental Therapy Association  
 American Institute of Dental Public Health  
 American Public Health Association  
 Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum  
 CareQuest Institute for Oral Health  
 Community Catalyst

National Coalition of Dentists for Health Equity  
 National Indian Health Board  
 National Network of Healthcare Hygienists  
 National Rural Health Association  
 Oral Health Progress and Equity Network (OPEN, Inc.)

*State/Regional Organizations:*

Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium  
 Alliance for a Healthy Washington

Apple Tree Dental (MN)  
Arizona Alliance for Community Health Centers  
Arizona Dental Hygienists' Association  
Arizona Oral Health Coalition  
The Bingham Program (ME)  
Bond Community Health Center, Inc. (FL)  
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network  
Capitol Dental Care (OR)  
Central Florida Health Care  
CHI St. Joseph's Health Community Dental Clinic  
(MN)  
Children's Alliance (WA)  
Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin  
Citizen Action of Wisconsin  
Clintonville-Beechwood Community Resources  
Center (OH)  
Community Health Centers of Pinellas, Inc. (FL)  
Connecticut Association of School Based Health  
Centers  
The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, Inc.  
Dental Care of Michigan  
Detroit Community Solutions  
Florida Dental Hygienists' Association, Inc.  
Florida Legal Services, Inc.  
Floridians for Dental Access  
Greater Tampa Bay Oral Health Coalition  
Haveman Group (MI)  
Hawai'i Public Health Institute  
Hawaii Children's Action Network  
Health Action New Mexico  
Health Care For All (MA)  
Healthier Colorado  
HealthMark (MN)  
Inter Tribal Association of Arizona  
Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center (OH)  
Kentucky Voices for Health  
Klamath Basin Oral Health Coalition (OR)  
The Local Health Council of East Central Florida,  
Inc.  
Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe  
Metropolitan State University (MN)  
Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health

Michigan Oral Health Coalition  
Minnesota Dental Therapy Association  
Native American Connections (AZ)  
Nevada Dental Hygienists Association  
New Mexico Dental Hygienists' Association  
New Mexico Dental Therapist Coalition  
North Dakota Nurses Association  
Northwest Health Law Advocates  
Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board  
Ohio Public Health Association  
Oklahoma Oral Health Coalition  
Oklahoma Policy Institute  
Oregon Dental Hygienists' Association  
Oregon Primary Care Association  
Oregon School-Based Health Alliance  
Our Children Oregon  
Pacific University (OR)  
Partnership for Aging Palm Beach County (FL)  
Pivotal Policy Consulting (AZ)  
Premier Community HealthCare (FL)  
Rhode Island JAYCEE Alliance  
Senior Charity Care Foundation (UT)  
Soft Smiles, LLC (GA)  
Statewide Poverty Action Network (WA)  
Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy  
Education (CA)  
Suncoast Community Health Centers, Inc. (FL)  
Swinomish Indian Tribal Community Dental Clinic  
(WA)  
Tacoma Healing Awareness Community (WA)  
Tampa Family Health Centers  
United Health Organization (MI)  
Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio  
Utah Health Policy Project  
Vermont Technical College  
Voices for Vermont's Children  
Washington State Dental Hygienists' Association  
West Central Initiative (MN)  
Wisconsin Dental Hygienists' Association  
Wisconsin Oral Health Coalition  
Wolfson Children's Hospital (FL)