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CONTACT: Jessica Tramontana

Phone: 517-974-6302

jtramontana@martinwaymire.com

Gov. Rick Snyder signs bill authorizing dental therapists

SB 541 allows dentists to voluntarily expand practices, and expands access to dental care

LANSING, Mich. — Gov. Rick Snyder has signed into law bipartisan legislation that aims to expand access to dental care for Michigan residents. SB 541, championed by Sen. Mike Shirkey (R-Clarklake), authorizes a midlevel dental provider called a “dental therapist” to perform a variety of routine procedures that previously were only performed by dentists.

Dental therapists will be a unique tool to target the currently underserved populations in our state. Language in the new law will limit their practice to safety net settings such as federally-qualified health centers, rural health centers, school-based clinics or they could work in other offices in shortage areas or where they are willing to see a majority of publicly-insured patients.

“This bill will ensure an improvement in overall access to oral health care for underserved patients, while allowing dentists the chance to expand their practices,” said Sen. Shirkey. “Too often, those with limited access to dental care resort to emergency rooms for relief and Michigan taxpayers have to foot the bill. Creating dental therapists is a solution from both a public health and fiscal perspective.”

Dental therapists will work as part of the dental team to provide preventive and routine restorative care, similar to a physician assistant on a doctor’s team. Supervised by a dentist, dental therapists can help dentists treat more patients.

Seventy-eight of Michigan’s 83 counties have at least one dental shortage area, leaving millions of Michigan residents without access to basic and routine oral care. Limited access to oral health care impacts some of Michigan’s most vulnerable residents, including seniors, pregnant women, children in low-income homes and those living in rural areas.

“Oral health is a window to overall health and well-being,” said Amy Zaagman, executive director of the Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health. “Limited access to adequate

dental health care comes with a hefty price tag—often in the form of missed days at school or work and larger dental problems that could have been avoided with routine care. We look forward to seeing dental therapists help our safety net settings and forward-thinking dentists provide access to care for many populations in Michigan currently underserved because of where they live or the type of insurance card they carry.”

For more information on SB 541, please visit www.midentalaccess.org.

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