

House Health Care Committee
Update on Vermont State University's Dental Therapy Program
Bard Levey, VTSU Director of Dental Therapy
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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to testify today about the status of Vermont State University's Dental Therapy Program.

My name is Dr. Bard Levey, and I am the Director of Dental Therapy at VTSU. I have been a dentist since 1991, and owned my own practice in New York until 2019. As of this month, I am also newly licensed in Vermont.

From 2019 to 2023, I taught at the University of Tennessee, where I became the director of a one year post graduate residency program. In this role, in addition to being solely responsible for all resident recruitment as well as all didactic and clinical training for my residents, I also wrote the CODA accreditation documentation for the Advanced Education in General Dentistry (AEGD) program at the University of Tennessee College of Dentistry.

I started in the role as director of dental therapy at Vermont State University in January of this year, and am excited to share that we are making good progress towards establishing this program, and are on track to apply for CODA accreditation later this year. I am focused on seeing the launch of this program through to success, and thereby affecting positive change for Vermonters by expanding access to health care in rural communities through the utilization of dental therapists. We have a clear focus for the work ahead, and support from administrative leadership at the newly merged Vermont State University.

I would like to share with you this afternoon some information about dental therapy, how it supports increasing access to dental services in rural communities, and a status update on the establishment of a dental therapy program at VTSU and what you can expect from us moving forward.

Need

Many Vermonters, especially those in low-income and rural communities, lack access to basic oral health care, leading to preventable dental problems that often have serious health consequences. According to the US DHHS using 2021 data, 12 out of 14 of Vermont's counties are designated Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas. This means that there is a serious

dearth of dentists and dental hygienists to adequately care for the population. According to the Vermont Department of Health, 37% of young children have dental decay, and more than 30% of adults do not seek regular preventative dental care.

Rural areas suffer the most and have the largest percentage of underserved populations.

The Role of Dental Therapy

Dental Therapy plays an important role in supporting Vermonters' access to dental services. I'd like to spend a few minutes outlining the role of dental therapists, and how they can become a significant piece in the quest to improve access to dental care, and therefore quality of life, in this state.

A dental therapist has a wider scope of treatment than a dental hygienist, but less than a dentist. They play a role similar to a physician assistant in a MD office, and can play a vital role in filling the gap caused by the lack of adequate numbers of dentists. As in medicine, dental problems are best either prevented or treated in an early phase. When caught early, treatments are less invasive and less expensive. Dental therapists are ideally suited to prevent, diagnose, and treat dental diseases in their early stages, making this type of provider a true game changer for the communities in which they work.

Under current law, dental therapists seeking licensure in Vermont will be required to be licensed dental hygienists and to complete a training program that meets the standards set by CODA, the Commission on Dental Accreditation. Upon graduation, the new dental therapist must also pass a national board exam to enable them to start seeing patients. At first, they must work under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist for their first 1,000 hours within the confines of a collaborative agreement. After this time the dental therapist can work under the general supervision of a licensed dentist, but their scope of treatment is clearly established within their collaborative agreement. Ultimately, the licensed dentist is responsible for the treatments rendered by the dental therapist. In Vermont, the dental therapist can work in any area, including private dental offices (which will help to improve the efficiency and treatment volume of the dentist), and in low income/underserved areas, such as in FQHC settings, to greatly improve access to and efficiency of basic dental care in underserved areas.

The scope of treatment for dental therapists includes (but is not limited to):

- Dental hygiene procedures
- Fillings
- Extractions of baby teeth and simple extractions of permanent teeth
- Basic prosthetic services (like lining a denture, etc.)
- Certain types of biopsies
- Diagnosis and palliative treatment of dental pain
- Rx meds
- Other important procedures

As mentioned above, bringing dental therapy to Vermont will allow us to continue to make progress on expanding access to necessary dental services for Vermonters, especially those in rural communities.

Current Timeline for Establishment of Dental Therapy Program

I am excited to report that we have a clear path ahead of us for pursuing the establishment of a Dental Therapy Program at VTSU. We are currently working on CODA self study preparation, and I am working with various key stakeholders, including the dental board, local FQHC clinics, the Vermont Department of Health, etc. to prepare for the recruitment and training of dental therapy students.

The next step in the process is to submit accreditation documentation to the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). The next deadline for submission of documentation is November 1, 2024, and we plan to submit our documents by that deadline. CODA will then meet in early 2025 to begin the review of applications.

Per CODA documentation, it will take 12-18 months before initial accreditation can be obtained, which we anticipate may happen between January and August of 2026. Per CODA restrictions, until initial accreditation is granted, we will not be allowed to market the program, recruit students or faculty.

According to that timeline, we could expect to enroll the first dental therapy class in either May 2026 or May 2027, depending on when CODA grants initial accreditation. Again, according to current state statute, dental therapists must graduate from a CODA accredited program.

Other CODA regulations state that dental therapy programs must offer a minimum of three years of training. According to this timeline, best case scenario, we would expect the first dental therapists to complete their training and begin to provide dental therapy services in May of 2029 or May of 2030, according to current state law.

Conclusion

Thank you for your continued interest in and support of the creation of this program, including the passage of Act 161 of 2016 and generous state funding. We acknowledge that the establishment of this program has not gone according to plan, but I am confident that by working together our path forward is realistic, achievable, and will lead to the accomplishment of our shared goals: the creation of a program that will have a significant impact on the overall health of Vermonters.

I look forward to keeping you updated on the progress of our efforts, and am happy to answer any questions you have, along with VTSU's VP of Academic Affairs and Provost Nolan Atkins, and VP of Business Operations, Sarah Truckle. Thank you.