

February 4, 2014
Senate Government Operations Committee

Good Afternoon, I am Steve Arthur, Director of the Office of Oral Health, Vermont Department of Health. I am pleased to be back again this afternoon to offer my comments about H.235, proposing a new dental team member, the Community Dental Health Coordinator.

There is no question that Vermont needs more care coordination in oral health, especially when considering existing access issues for many of our underserved Vermont residents and the rather dire dentist workforce issues to which I have testified previously. If we can do anything to insure that patients in need of oral health care can more easily access dental offices and also insure that they keep their dental appointments, then this dental health coordinator will be a welcome addition to our communities, and the Vermont Department of Health would be supportive of this concept.

The American Dental Association conceived of the Community Dental Health Coordinator 2006, and embarked on an ambitious program to educate and train a new member of the dental team, called the Community Dental Health Coordinator. As of the fall of 2013, the ADA announced that 34 students have graduated and are now practicing in 26 communities in seven states. By its own statement, the ADA “has invested thousands of hours and millions of dollars in making the Community Dental Health Coordinator a reality.”

In Vermont, our Office of Oral Health has been the lead in a vibrant “Tooth Tutor” program for over 15 years. This program shares the stated goals of the Community Dental Health Coordinator.... prevention, education and care coordination. These tooth tutors are usually dental hygienists, who are hired by local elementary schools (*using a part of their EPSDT funds*) to find dental homes for those children who have not seen a dentist in a year. We currently have approximately 30 Tooth Tutors serving in over 120 elementary schools, doing this important care coordination work. These hygienists also provide classroom oral health education. The Vermont Department of Health’s Office of Oral Health, provides the programmatic guidance for these Tooth Tutors. However, it is important to re-emphasize, the Tooth Tutors work for the schools, not the health department.

Additionally, we have Public Health Dental Hygienists working in the Office of Oral Health as well as in three of the local district health offices – Newport, Morrisville and Rutland. The district office dental hygienists are ½ time, 20 hours per week, and work primarily in the WIC programs of our district offices (*the Office of Oral Health has proposed that all 12 district health offices should have a Public Health Dental Hygienist*). Although they do direct dental care, education and care coordination, they have additional duties which are much beyond the capabilities of this proposed CDHC.

This bill, S.235, directs the Commissioner of Health, in consultation with the Vermont Oral Health Coalition, to design a Community Dental Health Coordinator Pilot project for the purpose of increasing access to oral health care by using community dental health coordinators as members of dental teams in regions of the state designated by the Commissioner.

Several things are left unaddressed. The bill is calling for the design of a Community Dental Health Coordinator Pilot project, yet no funding is provided, and there is:

- No mention of where these CDHCs will be coming from.
- No mention of where they will be trained or how they will be trained.
- No mention of how they will be paid and by whom?

The Community Dental Health Coordinator program has considerable merit and should be seriously considered. However, this bill would benefit by consultation with the Department of Health and the Vermont Oral Health Coalition, both entities mentioned throughout this short bill, but not consulted prior to the bill's introduction, either in 2013 or 2014.

We would be happy to work with the Vermont State Dental Society to address and clarify some of the information missing from this bill. In closing, I want to emphasize that S.235 in no way precludes continuing deliberation and consideration of S.35, the bill you have been considering regarding mid-level dental providers, the Licensed Dental Practitioner. In many ways, these two positions could be complementary to each other as we continue to address the serious needs of our underserved populations in Vermont.

Thank you for your attention, I'd be happy to take any questions you may have.

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