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April 13, 2016

Dear Madam Chair and members of the House Committee on Government Operations,

The Office of the Health Care Advocate (HCA) strongly supports S.20; an act relating to establishing and regulating dental therapists. Access to dental care is a significant issue in Vermont, particularly for low-income Vermonters, seniors, and children on Dr. Dynasaur. In 2015, the HCA's consumer helpline received over 100 calls from Vermonters having trouble accessing dental care. Many of these calls were from Medicaid beneficiaries who were unable to use their dental benefits because so few dentists in Vermont will take new Medicaid patients.

Some examples of our cases from 2014 and 2015 include the following:

- Ms. A called the HCA because there is only one dentist in her area (Windham County) who will accept Medicaid reimbursement and she is on a long waiting list. She needs extensive dental work due to a health issue and is about to lose a front tooth. She is in school to become an RN and is concerned about finding employment due to the state of her teeth.
- Ms. B called the HCA because she has Medicaid and needs a root canal, but is unable to get one because no dentist is accepting new Medicaid patients. She is able to get assistance to get the tooth extracted but not to get the root canal. She does not want to have the tooth extracted unnecessarily and is worried about an extraction causing other issues with her teeth.
- Mr. C called the HCA after calling all 31 dentists in the Rutland area listed as accepting new Medicaid patients in the Medicaid provider portal. He was unable to find one that would see him. Mr. D ended up having a painful tooth extracted during emergency hours at the community health center. He was still unable to find a regular dentist.
- Ms. D's 13-year-old son had a cleaning scheduled at his dental office. When the family arrived for the appointment, the office refused to see the child because his insurance had switched from a private plan to Medicaid. Although the office does accept Medicaid, they were not accepting new Medicaid patients. Ms. D's children would be considered new Medicaid patients because of the family's change in insurance coverage.

The dental therapist model has been tested in Minnesota and Alaska as well as in more than 50 countries throughout the world. In Minnesota, dental therapists have been licensed since 2011. A 2014 evaluation of the program found that dental therapists had provided care to 6,338 new patients, 84% of whom were enrolled in public health insurance programs. Minnesota saw decreased wait times for appointments and reduced travel time for patients, especially in rural areas.

The Office of the Health Care Advocate, previously named the Office of Health Care Ombudsman, is a special project of Vermont Legal Aid.

Preliminary data from the evaluation suggest that dental therapists reduce emergency room use for dental care not related to an injury. Other benefits included personnel cost savings, increased dental team productivity, and improved patient satisfaction. In Minnesota, the savings achieved due to employment of dental therapists have allowed clinics to expand capacity and better care for underserved populations. Safety has been maintained and quality of care has improved.

According to the American Dental Association, 49% of Vermont's dentists are nearing retirement age. In 2011, nearly 40% of Vermont's children enrolled in Medicaid did not receive any dental care. Dental therapists will help relieve Vermont's dental access problem and will allow more Vermonters to get the dental care they need in their communities. Dentists who choose to employ dental therapists will have the opportunity to expand their practices and treat more patients. Dental therapists will provide routine care so that dentists can be more available to provide complex care, and will give Vermont's dental offices an economically viable option for treating more Medicaid patients. To address Vermont's dental access problem, we need high-quality, cost-effective providers who will care for people in the communities where they live and work.

We ask for your support of S.20 and would be happy to answer any questions about the bill and how we believe it will benefit Vermonters.

Sincerely,

Trinka Kerr, Chief Health Care Advocate

Julia Shaw, Health Care Policy Analyst