

# VERMONT LEGAL AID, INC.

## OFFICE OF THE HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE

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May 6, 2015

Dear Madam Chair and members of the House Committee on Human Services,

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 2014, 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 include the following:

- Ms. A's child had a cleaning scheduled at the family's dental office. When the family got to the appointment, the office refused to see the child because his insurance had changed from a private plan to Medicaid. While the office accepts Medicaid, they would not see him because the office is not accepting any new Medicaid patients.
- Mr. B called the 31 dentists in Rutland listed as accepting new Medicaid patients. He was unable to find a single dentist that would see him. Mr. B ended up having a painful tooth extracted during emergency hours at the community health center but was still unable to find a dentist for regular care.
- Ms. C needed to see a dentist before she could have a surgical procedure done. She tried to find a dentist through the Medicaid website and found that the offices listed as taking new Medicaid patients were not in fact accepting any new Medicaid patients.
- Ms. D used to be on VHAP and paid out of pocket at her dentist for years. When she transitioned to Medicaid, she asked her dental office if they would accept her Medicaid. The dental office told her that while they do accept Medicaid, they would not see her because they are not taking any new Medicaid patients.

This 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. 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