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**To: House Human Services Committee**  
**From: Falko Schilling, Esq., Consumer and Environmental Advocate, VPIRG**  
**Date: January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016**  
**Re: S.20 Licensed Dental Therapists**

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For the record, my name is Falko Schilling and I am the Consumer and Environmental Advocate at Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG). VPIRG is the state's largest nonprofit consumer and environmental advocacy organization with more than 40,000 members and supporters across Vermont. One of VPIRG's core missions is to help provide access to high quality affordable health care to all Vermonters. We recognize that dental care is an essential part of comprehensive health care, and that steps need to be taken to help ensure that Vermonters can get the dental care they need. For these, and the following reasons we ask the Committee to pass S.20 and allow dental therapists to practice in Vermont.

### **A Solution for Vermont**

Mid-level dental providers (called dental therapists) are currently members of the dental team in 54 countries as well as in Alaska and Minnesota.<sup>i</sup> These providers have a scope of practice that is more expansive than a dental hygienist, but less expensive than a dentist. Dental therapists are members of the dental team that expand capacity to provide routine and preventive care to underserved populations. The proposed practitioner will be licensed to provide 34 critical procedures under the supervision of a dentist, while dentists perform over 500 procedures.

We believe that licensing dental therapists in Vermont will expand routine and preventive services to underserved populations. It is one tool that we can use to address our aging dental workforce, expand the capacity of Vermont's dentists to meet the needs of the newly insured Medicaid population, and improve Vermonter's access to dental care. We appreciate the time that the Committee has put in to reviewing S.20, and would like to take the opportunity to address some questions that have been raised during the deliberations about this new provider.

### **First Class Care**

A review of the global literature on dental therapists found "There have been many evaluations of the technical quality of care provided by dental therapists over the past 60 years. The studies have consistently found that the quality of technical care provided by dental therapists (within their scope of competency) was comparable to that of a dentist, and in some studies was judged to be superior."<sup>ii</sup>

It is also important to point out that the American Dental Association funded a study that was published in the January 2013 edition of the Journal of the American Dental Association that

concluded that, “A variety of studies indicate that appropriately trained midlevel providers are capable of providing high quality services.”<sup>iii</sup>

While it is well documented that dental therapists are consistently providing high quality care, it is also important to note that dental therapists work under the supervision of dentists. After graduating from an accredited training program, dental therapists are licensed and then participate in a supervised preceptorship. Following the preceptorship, they work under the supervision of a dentist to extend the reach of the dental team, much like physician’s assistants expand the capacity of the medical team.

A supervising dentist will have authority to manage the scope of practice for each dental therapist they oversee through issuing standing orders or developing a practice arrangement. The system ensures quality care is provided by the entire dental team.

### **Improved access**

Evidence shows that the addition of dental therapists can help improve access to dental care. This can be seen in the experience of Minnesota where dental therapists began entering the workforce in 2011. The positive impact of these providers is informative of the benefits Vermont would see from passing S.20. In the 2014 report “Early Impacts of Dental Therapists in Minnesota” the Minnesota Department of Health found that dental therapists have improved access in a number of areas. Clinics that employ dental therapists are seeing more new patients, have increased dental team productivity, decreased travel and wait times, and have seen lower appointment fail rates.<sup>iv</sup> Dental therapists in Alaska have also helped more than 40,000 Alaska natives receive treatment that previously lacked access to care.<sup>v</sup>

As we highlight the need to deliver dental care to underserved Vermonters enrolled in Medicaid, dental therapists are providing a model solution on how to expand services to this population. According to a 2013 Community Catalyst report, which explored the practice of dental therapists in Alaska and Minnesota, dental therapists are mainly providing routine and preventive care to underserved populations including rural, tribal, and those enrolled in Medicaid. In fact, according to the report 78% of the patients served in Minnesota are enrolled in Medicaid.<sup>vi</sup>

As we struggle to provide care to the newly insured Medicaid population, Dental therapists offer a proven and cost-effective example on how to address this important issue.

### **Adequate Education**

In 2015 the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) adopted standards for the training of dental therapists. CODA is the sole national dental accreditation body, and their mission is to serve “the oral health care needs of the public through the development and administration of standards that foster continuous quality improvement of dental and dental related educational programs.”<sup>vii</sup> At CODA’s August 7<sup>th</sup> meeting the Commission determined that the “Principles and Criteria Eligibility of Allied Dental Programs for Accreditation by the Commission on Dental Accreditation”

had been satisfied and directed that a process be implemented for accreditation of dental therapy education programs.<sup>viii</sup>

Dental therapists in Vermont will be trained at the Dental Hygiene Clinic at Vermont Technical College (VTC). VTC's Dental Hygiene Clinic is CODA accredited, and the proposed educational requirements for dental therapist will meet CODA standards. We are confident in the quality education that will be provided by VTC due to the fact that their program will meet CODA standards and VTC's strong track record of graduating high quality professionals that serve Vermonters every day.

## Conclusion

Based on our research we believe that S.20 represents an evidence based and proven solution to Vermont's dental issues. It allows for fully trained dental professionals to expand the capacity of the dental team in an effort to better meet the dental needs of their community. We believe that VTC has developed a comprehensive curriculum that when partnered with on the job training and personalized supervision, it will create a well-trained workforce that can offer high quality dental care to Vermonters.

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<sup>i</sup> Nash, David A. et al "A review of the Global Literature on Dental Therapists: In the Context of the Movement to Add Dental Therapists to the Oral Health Workforce in the United States" April 2012, at 2. Available at <http://www.wkcf.org/news/Articles/2012/04/~media/97A0E38A926443BF81491C09DCA6A7EA.ASHX>

<sup>iii</sup> Nash at 6

<sup>iii</sup> Wright, Timothy DDS MS. Do midlevel providers improve the population's oral health? Journal of the American Dental Association, January 2013, Volume 144, Issue 1, pages 92-94. Available at <http://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177%2814%2960574-2/fulltext>

<sup>iv</sup> Minnesota Department of Health, Minnesota Board of Dentistry "Early Impacts of Dental Therapists in Minnesota" Report to the Minnesota Legislature 2014, February 2014. Available at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/dt/dtlegisrpt.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> See i

<sup>vi</sup> Kim, Frances DDS, DrPH. Economic Viability of Dental Therapists, at 2. Available at

<http://www.communitycatalyst.org/doc-store/publications/economic-viability-dental-therapists.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Commission on Dental Accreditation, Homepage. <http://www.ada.org/en/coda>

<sup>viii</sup> Commission on Dental Accreditation, Accreditation News.

<http://www.ada.org/en/coda/accreditation/accreditation-news>