



Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council

“Celebrating our 44th year representing the interests of low income Vermonters”

Access to oral health care is one of the most pressing needs of low income folks in Vermont.

The Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council asks that you please consider supporting Senate Bill S.20; legislation that creates the position of certified Dental Therapist as part of a dental team, to increase access to dental care and improve oral health for low income Vermonters.

The Dental Therapist model is a real solution to a real problem.

Tens of thousands of low-income Vermonters – working parents, children, elders, people with special needs and people who live in rural areas – don’t get the preventative dental care they need, **because they can’t afford it, they can’t find a dentist who will accept Medicaid, they can’t get appointments for months, or they can’t get there at the times available.**

Compounding the problem is the fact that nearly half of Vermont’s dentists will retire in the next 10 years, creating a critical shortage of dental providers.

In order to get care to the tens of thousands of children and adults who do not have it, we need a provider who can give care provide high-quality, cost effective routine dental care to people in the communities where they live and work, in nursing homes, in schools in community centers and health clinics.

Untreated oral health conditions can cause disfiguring tooth loss and decay that can limit employment options and lower self-esteem. While regular dental care can prevent and treat many oral health problems, financial barriers pose significant dental access problems for many low-income families, Medicaid reimbursement is low and many dentists only take a few publically assisted patients.

Low-income adults are also much more likely than higher-income adults to have gone without routine dental care and to have postponed or foregone care, often ending up in emergency rooms for life long dental problems which could have been prevented.

Since the permanent teeth begin to develop in early childhood, for children, access to regular dental care will determine the likelihood of future oral health. Good oral health is essential to a child’s social well-being.

For seniors who can go for years untreated; dental disease leads to pain and poor nutrition. Proper nutrition is linked to good health and better quality of life. Folks with special health needs, and chronic conditions are more prone to oral diseases.

There is a critical need to expand capacity and increase access now before the problem gets worse.

A dental therapist works with a dentist like a physician's assistant works with a doctor, providing routine oral health services both restorative and preventative care, while dentists continue to perform the most complex procedures that only they are qualified to do. The dental therapist would work under a dentist supervision with a collaborative agreement that is reviewed and updated annually by the Board of Dental Examiners, and be required to pass a comprehensive competency-based clinical exam before practicing, and serve a number of required hours before they provide services in a community setting - still under the supervision of a dentist.

This mid-level provider will make sure basic dental care is available to people who currently cannot get the dental care they need, in the places they can access it. It is a proven model that will make routine dental care more available to all Vermonters.

We need another option to increase access to dental services. A study conducted for the Green Mountain Care Board last year found that "Vermont will have to employ alternative dental work force models to bridge the gap created by an ageing dental workforce."

A Dental Therapist as part of the dental team is a solution to a growing problem. It is a proven model that will make routine dental care more available to all Vermonters. Both the Legislative VT Child Poverty Council and the Governor's Pathways from Poverty Councils have endorsed and recommended that we pursue this model for Vermont.

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