

# VERMONT LEGAL AID, INC.

## OFFICE OF THE HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE

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January 23, 2015

Dear Madam Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare,

The Office of the Health Care Advocate (HCA) supports S.20, An act relating to establishing and regulating licensed dental practitioners. 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 who were having trouble accessing dental care. Licensed dental practitioners will help relieve Vermont's dental access problem and will allow more Vermonters to get the dental care they need in their communities.

This model has been tested in Minnesota, where midlevel dental providers have been licensed since 2011. An evaluation<sup>1</sup> of Minnesota's midlevel dental providers in 2014 found that they 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 midlevel dental providers reduce emergency room use for dental care not related to an injury. Other benefits cited include personnel cost savings, increased dental team productivity, and improved patient satisfaction. In Minnesota, the savings achieved due to employment of midlevel dental providers 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. Vermont has also seen emergency department use for dental care increase. Licensed dental practitioners can make high-quality, cost-effective, routine dental care more available to Vermonters. Licensed dental practitioners will provide routine preventive care and oral health education so that dentists can use their time to provide complex care. They will give the dentists who choose to employ them the opportunity to expand their practices and treat more patients. To address Vermont's dental access problem, we need cost-effective providers who will care for people in the communities where they live and work. Licensed dental practitioners will make much-needed dental care available to more Vermonters.

Sincerely,

Julia Shaw, MPH  
Health Care Policy Analyst  
Office of the Health Care Advocate  
Vermont Legal Aid

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<sup>1</sup>Minnesota Department of Health and Minnesota Board of Dentistry, *Report to the Minnesota Legislature 2014: Early Impacts of Dental Therapists in Minnesota*, February 2014.