



August 21, 2019

TO: Chairman Patrick Testin  
Members of the Senate Health Committee

RE: 2019 Senate Bill 89; relating to the licensure of dental therapist

---

On behalf of the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPHCA), I am writing to express support for 2019 Senate Bill 89 (2019 AB 81).

The Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association believes the licensure of dental therapists in Wisconsin is an important tool to improve access to oral health care in the State.

Specifically, we believe that inclusion of dental therapists within the Community Health Center model could have the following effects:

- Shorten wait time for patients
- Allow dentists more time to do complex procedures
- Provide cost effective preventive and routine restorative care
- Help to improve overall access to oral health care, therefore improving community health

**Shorten wait time for patients:**

Lake Superior Community Health Center has dental practices in both Duluth, MN and Superior, WI. **The addition of dental therapists (in 2014) in their Duluth clinic team decreased wait times for restorative care from 36 weeks down to 6 weeks:**

“We saw improved access across the bridge in Duluth when we added dental therapists to our practice. For example, our wait times for restorative care went down from 36 weeks on average to 6 weeks,” said Cheryl Larsen, Operations Director at Lake Superior Community Health Center. “We also complete treatment plans faster, which allows us to see new patients, when dental therapists are involved.”

Wisconsin’s oral health needs are not limited to adults. In our State, one in three children are living with untreated dental decay and one in five 3<sup>rd</sup> graders have untreated dental disease.<sup>1</sup> Despite the efforts being made statewide by dentists in private practice and at Community Health

---

<sup>1</sup> National Survey of Children’s Health. NSCH 2011/12. Data query from the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health website. Retrieved 7/30/2018 from <http://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=2575&r=1&r2=51>  
5202 Eastpark Blvd., Suite 109, Madison, WI 53718 • Phone 608-277-7477 • Fax 608-277-7474  
E-Mail: [wphca@wphca.org](mailto:wphca@wphca.org) • Website: [www.wphca.org](http://www.wphca.org)

Centers, Wisconsin has consistently ranked in the bottom decile in terms of the rate of Medicaid-enrolled children who see a dentist each year.<sup>2</sup>

### **Allow dentists more time to do complex procedures**

According to Competitive Wisconsin's Be Bold Initiative, and the Wisconsin Talent Development 2014-2018 Strategic Plan, Wisconsin's labor demand will exceed the labor supply by 46,000 workers by 2022, which is only 3 years away. As our population demographics shift towards an aging population, particularly in our rural areas, we will see growing challenges in ensuring that we have caregivers of all kinds close to where people live. We need to be thinking creatively about addressing health needs in a much more urgent way. Creating a dental mid-level provider is one way to ensure that oral health needs can be met amid these rapidly changing demographics.

Dental therapists are highly educated, licensed oral health professionals who work with a dental care team under the general supervision of a dentist. The Council of Dental Accreditation (CODA) is the sole agency which accredits dental and dental hygiene schools. CODA is responsible for accrediting dental therapy education. 2019 SB 89 ensures that Wisconsin's dental therapists are also educated under these rigorous standards.

### **Provide cost effective preventive and routine restorative care**

When people prolong seeking care or can't access it, problems worsen. Between January 2017 and June 2018, the Wisconsin Hospital Association Information Center found that there were 2,063 visits to emergency departments for oral health related issues for children 18 and younger in Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup> Emergency departments are not equipped to deal with the root cause of most oral health pain, and can generally prescribe antibiotics and pain killers, which contributes to our current substance abuse crisis in the state. Providing additional and affordable access for people by expanding the dental team could help to ensure that people can get the right care, at the right place, at the right time which is better for health and overall cost of care.

### **Improve overall access to oral health care, therefore improving community health**

Community Health Centers provide primary care, behavioral health and oral health services to over 300,000 Wisconsinites each year. Since 2008, Community Health Centers have tripled their dental capacity to answer the call of Wisconsinites who are living without oral health care. Over 161,000 people received dental services at Community Health Centers in 2017. A 2015 Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) survey found 15% of Wisconsin adults had untreated tooth decay, 17% had gum disease, and 16% needed treatment for oral decay, abscesses, or lesions.<sup>4</sup> The same study found one in five Wisconsin adults also reported having a need for dental care and not getting it in 2015.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/benefits/epsdt/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whainfocenter.com/analytics/?ID=57>

<sup>4</sup> Yang, A. and Olsen, M. (2015) The Oral Health of Wisconsin Adults. Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Retrieved from <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01074.pdf>

As leaders in the oral health care safety net, Community Health Centers know that oral health is whole-body health. The health of our mouth is vital to our ability to consume food, drink water and communicate. Beyond healthy teeth, oral health includes being free of chronic oral and facial pain, treatment of certain oral cancers, as well as other disorders and diseases.<sup>5</sup>

Community Health Centers in Wisconsin value the importance of oral health and have been recognized for their continued efforts to expand access, integrate services, and find innovative ways to meet the needs of their communities. The licensure of dental therapists in Wisconsin is a tool in this effort to support the oral health of Wisconsinites.

Sincerely,

---



---

T.R. Williams, J.D.  
608-443-2953  
trwilliams@wphca.org  
Advocacy & Government Relations Specialist  
Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association

#### ABOUT WPHCA:

WPHCA is the membership association for Wisconsin's 17 Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) also known as Community Health Centers (CHCs). Community Health Centers work to create healthier communities by improving access, providing quality health care and reducing health disparities for Wisconsin's underserved and low-income populations. Our aim is to ensure that all Wisconsinites achieve their highest health potential. We execute our mission and focus our aim through providing training and technical assistance to Wisconsin's Community Health Centers and advocating on their behalf.

---

<sup>5</sup> Oral Health Program (May 2018). Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Received from <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/oral-health/index.htm>