

# DENTAL THERAPY: AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE ORAL HEALTH CARE IN WISCONSIN

## WHAT IS A DENTAL THERAPIST?

A Dental Therapist is a mid-level provider, similar to a Physician Assistant in medicine.<sup>1</sup> They practice under the supervision of a Dentist and work in a team model with other oral health providers including Dental Assistants and Hygienists. Dental Therapists provide preventive and routine restorative care, including filling cavities, placing temporary crowns, and extracting baby teeth and adult teeth that are extremely loose. This allows Dentists to focus on the most complex care and work at the top of their license. Dental Therapists are not currently authorized to practice in Wisconsin.

## WHY SUPPORT DENTAL THERAPY?

Preventative oral health care is important for both children and adults. Studies show that when children receive preventive dental care, they miss fewer days of school, and adults can avoid missing work.<sup>2</sup> Tooth decay, pain, and poor oral health can also lead to expensive emergency room visits. The 2015 Wisconsin Healthy Smiles Survey found that ninth-grade students experiencing tooth or mouth pain two or more times in the past year were more than twice as likely to receive lower grades in school compared to students experiencing pain less frequently.<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that most oral health issues are preventable, if caught early. Authorizing practice of Dental Therapy will add options for new oral health team members, increase the efficiency of existing oral health staff, and help close the gap for needed preventive care in Wisconsin.

## WORKFORCE SHORTAGES

Primarily due to staffing challenges, some Community Health Centers are limiting appointments just to established patients and individuals with dental emergencies. Even for existing patients, dental appointments are often scheduling over 6 months out. Community Health Centers report it takes on average 12 weeks to hire a Hygienist, and over double that timeline, nearly six months, to hire a Dentist.<sup>4</sup> Many patients do not have options for other sources of dental care, which means they are delaying care, and that dental concerns are exacerbated by the time they see a provider.

The majority of Wisconsin counties are dental Health Professions Shortage Areas; the Health Resources and Services Administration estimates that an additional 275 Dentists would be needed to remove shortage designations statewide and meet a recommended 5,000:1 population to Dentist ratio.<sup>5</sup>

**ONLY 170,000 (30%) OF THE 570,000 WISCONSINITES UNDER 21 WHO ARE ENROLLED IN MEDICAID RECEIVED PREVENTATIVE DENTAL SERVICES<sup>6</sup>**

**ONE-FIFTH OF WISCONSIN THIRD-GRADERS HAVE UNTREATED DENTAL DECAY AND 5% HAVE AN URGENT CONDITION CAUSING PAIN AND/OR INFECTION<sup>7</sup>**

## WHAT IS IN WISCONSIN'S DENTAL THERAPY LEGISLATION?

2021 Senate Bill 181 was co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of 33 legislators. In the 2021-2022 legislative session, over 25 organizations registered in support of the legislation. Senate Bill 181 passed unanimously in the Senate; no hearing was held in the Assembly.

The legislation outlines a set of procedures that Dental Therapists may perform, subject to a collaborative management agreement with a Dentist. Once a Dental Therapist has provided services for at least 2,000 hours, they may provide care under the general supervision of a Dentist. Dental Therapists must also, under the bill, either 1) limit their practice to federally defined dental shortage areas or 2) practice in settings where at least 50% of their patient base consists of certain specified populations.

They must also graduate from an accredited training institution, or, if unaccredited, receive approval from the Wisconsin Dentistry Examining Board. Fortunately, several technical colleges in Wisconsin are interested in starting Dental Therapy programs.

## WHAT OTHER ORAL HEALTH POLICY INITIATIVES ARE OCCURRING IN WISCONSIN?

There is significant interest in expanding access to preventative oral health care in Wisconsin. Recent public policy and budget initiatives include:

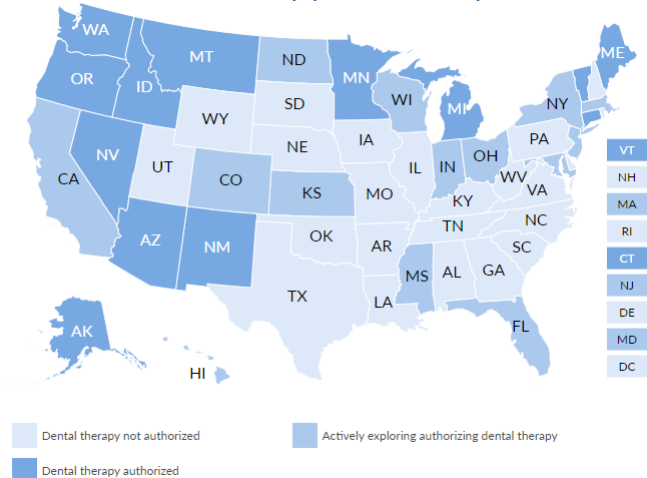
- 40% Medicaid rate increase for private practice dental clinics.
- Authorization for Expanded Function Dental Auxiliaries (EFDAs), a type of advanced Dental Assistant.
- WI DHS received an Oral Health Pipeline grant to improve dental workforce data, develop apprenticeships, and reduce barriers to entry for oral health professions training.

## IS THERE EVIDENCE THAT SHOWS DENTAL THERAPISTS PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY CARE?

Yes! Studies of models in Alaska, Minnesota, and other states suggest that Dental Therapists, while working within a set of allowable determined procedures, offer the same quality of care as Dentists.<sup>8</sup>

**DENTAL THERAPISTS ARE AUTHORIZED IN 13 STATES. OVER A DOZEN OTHER STATES ARE ACTIVELY EXPLORING DENTAL THERAPY AUTHORIZATIONS<sup>9</sup>**

Dental Therapy Policies by State



Source: PEW. National Momentum Building for Midlevel Dental Providers. Updated January 2023.

<sup>1</sup>National Partnership for Dental Therapy. [About Dental Therapy](#). 2022.  
<sup>2</sup>Wisconsin Oral Health Coalition. [Wisconsin's Roadmap to Improving Oral Health - 2020-2025](#). 2020.  
<sup>3</sup>Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Oral Health Program. [Wisconsin Healthy Smiles Survey](#). 2015.  
<sup>4</sup>Centers for Medicare & Medicaid. [Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment](#). 2022.  
<sup>5</sup>Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Oral Health Program. [Healthy Smiles Healthy Growth](#). 2018  
<sup>6</sup>Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association. [Wisconsin Community Health Center Workforce Report July 2022](#).  
<sup>7</sup>Wisconsin Department of Health Services. [Number of Dentist FTEs Needed to Reduce Significant Shortages for Medicaid Members](#). 2019.  
<sup>8</sup>Health Resources & Services Administration. [Supporting Dental Therapy through Title VII Training Programs: A Meaningful Strategy for Implementing Oral Health Care](#). 2022.  
<sup>9</sup>Oral Health Workforce Research Center. [Authorization Status of Dental Therapists by State](#). 2020.