

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.¹ 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?

Many Wisconsinites, especially individuals who are uninsured, low-income, or experience health disparities, face barriers accessing preventative oral health care. COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges, as many patients needed to delay in-person care and clinics experienced record staff departures.²

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.³ 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 prior year were more than twice as likely to receive lower grades in school compared to students experiencing pain less frequently.⁴

ONLY 180,000 (30%) OF THE 590,000 WISCONSINITES UNDER 21 WHO ARE ENROLLED IN MEDICAID RECEIVED PREVENTATIVE DENTAL SERVICES IN 2022⁵

ONE-FIFTH OF WISCONSIN THIRD-GRADERS HAVE UNTREATED DENTAL DECAY AND 5% HAVE AN URGENT CONDITION CAUSING PAIN AND/OR INFECTION⁶

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 preventative care in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Community Health Centers provided dental care for 158,158 patients in 2022 and are dedicated to closing oral health care access gaps. Unfortunately, the wait time for a new patient to schedule preventative dental care at a Community Health Center is increasing. Primarily due to staffing challenges, some Community Health Centers are prioritizing appointments to established patients

and individuals with dental emergencies. Even for existing patients, dental appointments are often scheduled over six months out. Community Health Centers report it takes on average three months to hire a Hygienist, and over double that timeline, nearly six months, to hire a Dentist.⁷ 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 (HPSAs); 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.⁸

WHAT IS IN WISCONSIN'S DENTAL THERAPY LEGISLATION?

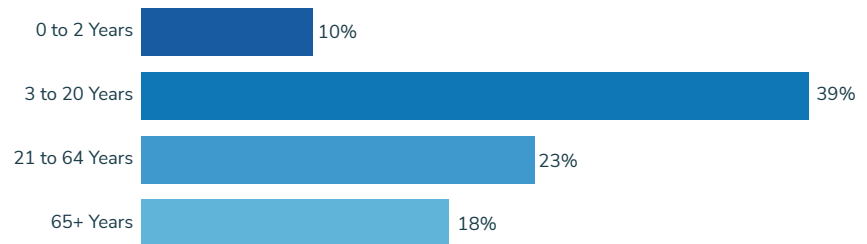
2021 Senate Bill 181 / Assembly Bill 169 was introduced by Sen. Felzkowski and Rep. Plumer, and co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of 33 legislators. In the 2021-2022 legislative session, over 25 organizations registered in support of the legislation; the Wisconsin Dental Association was neutral on the bill. Organizations such as the Badger Institute, Children's Hospital, Delta Dental, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, technical colleges, Disability Rights Wisconsin, Tribal clinics, and Kids Forward were supportive. Senate Bill 181 passed unanimously in the Senate; no hearing was held in the Assembly.

NEARLY ONE-FIFTH OF MEDICAID-ENROLLED DENTISTS DID NOT SEE MEDICAID PATIENTS⁸

% Medicaid Members with any Dental Service by Age Group in Wisconsin

(DHS 2022)

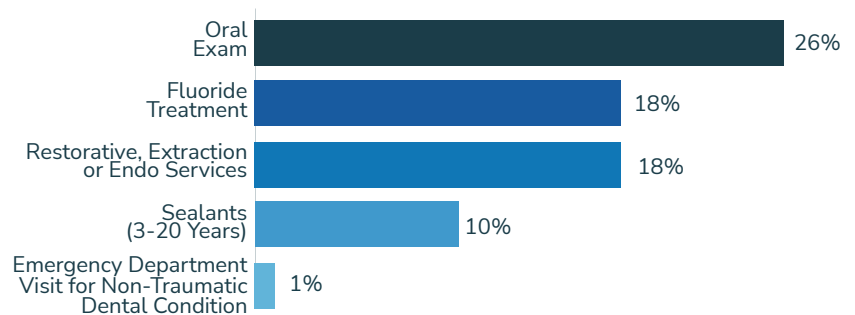
Less than 40% of Medicaid enrolled children (ages 3-20) received dental services in 2022. Working age adults and seniors were even less likely to have received dental services.



% Total Medicaid Members by Receipt of Oral Health Service by Type in Wisconsin

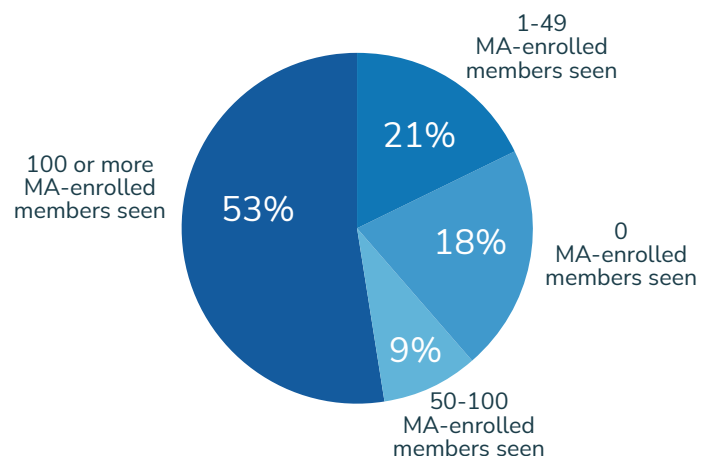
(DHS 2022)

26% of Medicaid members received an oral health exam and 28% of members received preventive services (Fluoride treatment and Sealants for children 3-20).



Wisconsin Medicaid Enrolled Dentists and Medicaid Patient Care Provided

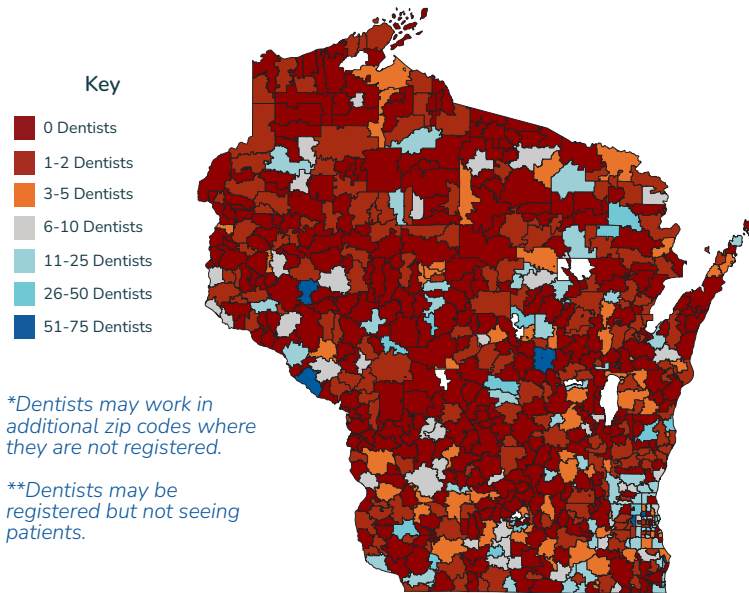
(DHS 2022) N=878 Dentists



Number of Dentists Licensed by Zip Code in Wisconsin

(DSPS 2023) N=3,444 licensed dentists

53% of zip codes in Wisconsin have 0 Dentists registered.
An additional 22% of zip codes have less than 2 Dentists.⁹



TRAINING AND SUPERVISION REQUIREMENTS

The legislation outlines a set of procedures that Dental Therapists may perform, subject to a collaborative management agreement with a Dentist. Once a licensed 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 such as individuals enrolled in Medicaid, uninsured patients, veterans, and individuals with disabilities. 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.

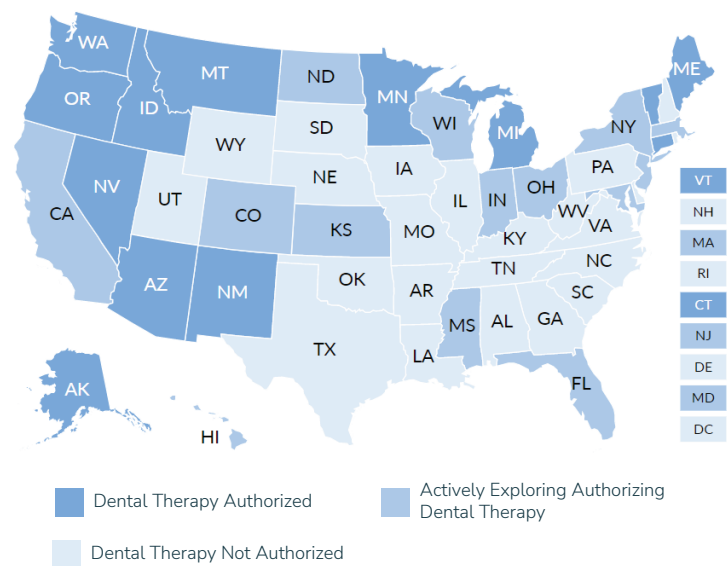
WHERE DO DENTAL THERAPISTS PRACTICE IN THE U.S.?

Dental Therapists are authorized to practice in at least some settings in 13 states.¹⁰ Over a dozen other states are actively exploring authorizing Dental Therapy.

IS THERE EVIDENCE SHOWING 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.¹¹

Dental Therapy Policies by State¹²



¹ National Partnership for Dental Therapy. *About Dental Therapy*. 2022.

² National Association of Community Health Centers. *Current State of the Health Center Workforce*. 2022.

³ Wisconsin Oral Health Coalition. *Wisconsin's Roadmap to Improving Oral Health - 2020-2025*. 2020.

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Oral Health Program. *Wisconsin Healthy Smiles Survey*. 2015.

⁵ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid. *Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment*. 2022.

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Oral Health Program. *Healthy Smiles Healthy Growth*. 2018

⁷ Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association. *Wisconsin Community Health Center Workforce Report July 2022*.

⁸ Wisconsin Department of Health Services. *Number of Dentist FTEs Needed to Reduce Significant Shortages for Medicaid Members*. 2019.

⁹ Department of Safety and Professional Services. *List of Dentists Registered in Wisconsin*. 2023.

¹⁰ Oral Health Workforce Research Center. *Authorization Status of Dental Therapists by State*. 2020.

¹¹ Health Resources & Services Administration. *Supporting Dental Therapy through Title VII Training Programs: A Meaningful Strategy for Implementing Oral Health Care*. 2022.

¹² PEW. *National Momentum Building for Midlevel Dental Providers*. Updated January 2023.