

March 29, 2022

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Murray and Ranking Member Blunt:

We once again write to you to urge Congress to support states that are seeking to expand their oral health workforce with dental therapists. Last May, more than 90 organizations across the country asked you to exclude any language in the FY2022 Labor HHS Appropriations bills that would prohibit states or Tribal communities from accessing health workforce grants to expand their oral health workforce through dental therapy programs. We were initially heartened to see that the FY2022 House and Senate Labor HHS appropriations bills eliminated this prohibition and that report language included a strong statement on the importance of dental therapists as part of the dental workforce. However, we were disappointed to see the prohibition¹ reappear in the recently passed omnibus spending package.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic with significant backlogs in unmet health and dental care, our country continues to face health workforce shortages. This dynamic only compounds existing dental access barriers and longstanding inequities in oral health. Now, more than ever, Congress should be focused on expanding the dental workforce instead of perpetuating policies that hinder the deployment of new providers in communities facing the greatest shortages. As such, **we urge Congress to eliminate this funding ban in FY2023 and fully fund the alternative dental health care provider demonstration grant program.**

Dental care is out of reach for many Americans. Almost [62 million Americans](#) live in areas without enough dental providers and almost one-third of adults report having [skipped dental care due to cost](#). Moreover, access to dental care in Medicaid remains inconsistent as the availability and comprehensiveness of optional adult dental benefits varies widely from state to state and fewer than half of dentists [accept Medicaid](#) at all, leaving many families without access to care even if they do have coverage. Due to these barriers, oral health has become one of the most visible examples of health disparities in America. Good oral health is taken for granted by many Americans but remains out of reach for many low-income families, communities of color, Tribal communities, and rural Americans. Bad teeth are not just a visible reminder of the inequities in our oral health system, they [affect](#) overall health, performance in school and earning potential.

In order to address this crisis and the growing divide, it is critical to support the expansion of the dental workforce to include dental therapists. Across the country, more and more states are authorizing dental therapists to address growing unmet need, and ensure that every community

¹ Page 394: “That no funds shall be available for section 340G–1”

has access to dental care. Unfortunately, many of these states lack the federal support needed to expand their oral health workforce.

Across the states, support for dental therapy has been bipartisan and diverse. President Biden endorsed the expansion of dental therapists in his [campaign platform](#) and the Trump Administration [promoted](#) them as well. Most recently, the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research highlighted dental therapy as one of the most innovative approaches to improving access to care in its follow-up to the 2000 Surgeon General’s report, [Oral Health in America, Advances and Challenges](#). Recognizing the potential of dental therapists to improve access to dental care, Congress created a grant program (Public Health Service Act, Section 340G-1) to support the training and development of dental providers like dental therapists in 2010. However, this grant program has never been funded because Congress continues to include appropriations language that prohibits the Health Resources and Services Administration from funding it, effectively limiting the ability of states and Tribes to test and deploy alternative dental provider models as they see fit.

Dental therapists are licensed providers who play a similar role in dentistry to that of physician assistants in medicine and work under the supervision of dentists to provide routine care like exams and fillings. Using telehealth to collaborate with their supervising dentist, dental therapists can bring care to people where they are, including schools, nursing homes and rural communities. And because their employment cost is, on average, one-third to one-half the amount of a dentist, hiring dental therapists is a cost-effective way for safety-net clinics to stretch their budgets to treat more patients. A number of colleges are building education programs in partnership with rural communities, communities of color and Tribal communities to create an accessible pathway for people from areas with little access to oral health care to become the dental providers their communities need. For the first time, these communities are having regular access to dental care from someone who is part of their community.

Dental therapists have been working in the U.S. for almost 20 years and have a proven track record of high-quality care. To be clear, dental therapy education programs are accredited by the same body that accredits education programs for dentists. Currently, dental therapists are authorized in at least some settings in 12 states, eight more states have had legislation introduced in the last year to authorize them and many more are considering legislation.

States with Dental Therapists Authorized	States with Legislation in Past Year
AK, AZ, CT, ID, ME, MI, MN, NM, NV, OR, VT, WA	CO, FL, IN, KS, MA, NJ, NY, WI

In addition to once again asking you to end this discriminatory ban on funding in FY2023, we urge you to allocate at least \$5 million in funding for this grant program and allow states to leverage federal workforce grant programs in support of proven, community-driven dental therapy programs. It is important that Congress put its trust in the communities on the ground to pursue this workforce model as intended. Lifting the ban and fully funding this grant program would do just that. It would not merely accelerate the implementation of dental therapists, but more importantly, make important strides in addressing provider shortages and increase access to care for communities that face the highest barriers to oral health.

We urge you to help the communities you represent expand their oral health workforces by providing the necessary support for dental therapists.

Sincerely,

American Association for Community Dental Programs	Families USA
American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research	National Association of Community Health Centers
American Dental Hygienists' Association	National Coalition of Dentists for Health Equity
American Institute of Dental Public Health	National Indian Health Board
American Public Health Association	National Interprofessional Initiative on Oral Health
Community Catalyst	National Rural Health Association
American Children's Campaign (FL)	New Mexico Dental Hygienists' Association
Apple Tree Dental (MN)	New Mexico Health Resources
Arizona Alliance for Community Health Centers	New Mexico Oral Health Coalition
Arizona Dental Hygienists' Association	Normandale Community College (MN)
Arizona Oral Health Coalition	Northwest Health Law Advocates (WA)
Brightwork Dental Hygiene Practice (CA)	Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network	Oklahoma Policy Institute
Capitol Dental Care (OR)	Oral Health Connections Mary Kelly, LLC (IA)
Children's Alliance (WA)	Oral Healthcare At Home, Inc. (NH)
Children's Dental Services (MN)	Oregon Oral Health Coalition
Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin	Pacific University (OR)
Children's Oral Health Network of Maine	Partnership for Children's Oral Health (ME)
Community Health & Wellness Partners (OH)	Sea Mar Community Health Centers (WA)
Connecticut Association of School Based Health Centers	Senior Charity Care Foundation (UT)
Consumers for Affordable Health Care (ME)	Socorro Dental LLC (NM)
Equality State Policy Center (WY)	Sound Dental Care (WA)
Florida Dental Hygienists' Association	Southern Plains Tribal Health Board
Florida Policy Institute	Southside Community Health Services (MN)
Floridians for Dental Access	Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute Board of Regents (NM)
Forever Smiles (MN)	Statewide Poverty Action Network (WA)
Georgians for a Healthy Future	Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (CA)
Health Action New Mexico	Suncoast Community Health Centers, Inc. (FL)
Health Care For All (MA)	Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (WA)
Healthier Colorado	Tacoma Healing Awareness Community (WA)
HealthPartners (MN)	Tennessee Justice Center
Hoosier Action	The Bingham Program (ME)
Jacksonville Urban League Center for Advocacy and Social Justice	The Connecticut Oral Health Initiative, Inc.
Kennebec Valley Family Dentistry (ME)	Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio
Kentucky Voices for Health	University of Bridgeport, Fones School of Dental Hygiene (CT)
Klamath Basin Oral Health Coalition (OR)	Vermont Dental Hygienists' Association
Life Planning Partners, Inc. (FL)	Vermont Technical College
Maine Dental Hygienists' Association	Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations
Maine Oral Health Coalition	Visiting Dental Hygiene, Inc. (MA)
Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative	Voices for Vermont's Children
Metropolitan State University (MN)	Washington Dental Hygienists' Association
Michigan Dental Hygienists' Association	Waterville Community Dental Center (ME)
Michigan Disability Rights Coalition	West Virginia Dental Hygienists' Association
Michigan Primary Care Association	Wisconsin Dental Hygienists' Association
Minnesota Dental Therapy Association	Wisconsin Oral Health Coalition
New Jersey Dental Hygienists' Association	
New Mexico Dental Clinics LLC	