



Advocates Praise Bill To License Dental Therapists, But Dental Groups Skeptical Of Impact, Warn Of Hazards

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A proposal to allow dental therapists to perform many of the tasks of dentists in underserved areas got mixed reviews right out of the chute this week.

Shortly after its introduction, the bill (SB 330) was praised by advocates who say it will improve oral health for those who need it, but panned by industry groups that maintain the plan won't be effective and could be dangerous for Ohioans.

Sponsored by Sen. Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering), the measure would allow for the licensure of dental therapists who would have a limited scope of practice that includes filling cavities. It targets dental therapists toward areas that have a shortage of dentists or high percentages of patients on Medicaid.

The bill earned plaudits from UHCAN Ohio, an advocacy group that, through its campaign Dental Access Now!, called for the licensure of dental therapists at a March news conference in Columbus. (See Gongwer Ohio Report, March 1, 2016)

The bill will also reduce regulatory burdens on dental hygienists, the group said in a news release.

"When it comes to dental care, particularly for low-income and rural Ohioans, there are simply not enough dentists to meet the needs of many communities," Executive Director Steve Wagner said. "Unfortunately, we will see the shortage of dentists grow over the next decade, making access to dental care for underserved communities even more difficult. We applaud Senator Lehner's leadership to improve access to oral health care by expanding the dental care workforce."

Pointing to the success of similar programs in Alaska and Minnesota, supporters said the bill would improve access to dental care.

"The workforce model proposed in SB330 has support from dentists, hygienists, conservative groups, service providers, food banks, and dozens of statewide and local organizations who know that expanding access to dental services enables Ohioans to get the care they need to lead healthier lives," said David Maywhoor, project director of Dental Access Now!

But not all dentists support the bill. Dr. Chris Connell, a general dentist from Lyndhurst and president of the Ohio Dental Association, said the proposal could be dangerous for patients and won't be effective in expanding access to dental care.



Caption here.

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"Allowing undertrained individuals to perform irreversible surgical procedures would be detrimental to the oral health of Ohioans and would be an unnecessary distraction from the progress being made in addressing the critical issue of access to dental care in Ohio," he said.

Dr. Connell said the required training for dental therapists is inadequate for people who perform irreversible surgical procedures, including drilling, extractions and restorations.

He also cited a bill passed last General Assembly (HB463, 130th General Assembly) that was designed to increase access to dental care, including doubling the capacity of the Ohio Dentist Loan Repayment Program. That program has created incentives for dozens of dentists to provide care in shortage areas, he said.

"These progressive reforms just became effective, so let's give them a chance to work," he said.

Paul Casamassimo, director of the Pediatric Oral Health Research and Policy Center with the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, said in a statement that the bill doesn't provide a solution for improving dental care for children.

"Countries heavily invested in a dental therapy approach to children's oral health have not demonstrated improved outcomes, and children entering young adulthood are no better off than U.S. children," he said.

"To believe that dental therapy is the panacea for lack of access to dental care for children is folly," he added. "To train more 'fixers' and ignore opportunities to prevent this costly condition through dental homes for children is a very poor use of resources."