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New Legislation Could Reduce Trend of Too Few Dentists and Too Much Decay

Columbus— Today, Senators Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering) and Cecil Thomas (D-Cincinnati) introduced Senate Bill 98 (SB98), legislation that would allow dental therapists to practice in Ohio's underserved communities. Dental therapists are specially trained professionals who can provide a limited number of treatment services like filling cavities. Allowing dental therapists to work for dentists would address the significant shortage of oral health professionals throughout Ohio.

New data from the [Ohio Department of Health](#) show that we continue to fail our children when it comes to oral health care. According to the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), 51 percent of Ohio's third graders have a history of tooth decay, and 17 percent have untreated tooth decay. Children from low-income families and those without private insurance have about two times more untreated cavities and toothaches. This new legislation could dramatically increase access to care in Ohio's underserved communities.

"Access to oral health care has been Ohio's number one unmet health need for children and low-income adults for more than two decades," said Steve Wagner, Executive Director of Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio (UHCAN Ohio). "This should be the last generation of children who suffer needlessly from lack of access to dental care."

Nearly a third of the children did not get dental care because they had no insurance or Medicaid/insurance was not accepted by the provider. Another 30 percent could not afford care, 16 percent had to wait too long for an appointment, and eight percent had no way to get to a dentist.

The access problem is worsened by the lack of dentists in many communities. As of February 2017, ODH reports that Ohio has 88 dental health professional shortage areas, up from 56 in 2009 and 85 in 2016. The shortage areas are counties or communities where there are too few dentists to meet the communities' needs.

"The expertise and experience of dentists are needed to provide complex care, but not all dental services need to be delivered by a dentist," said Wagner. "Ohio would greatly benefit by having practitioners who can provide basic restorative care—the care that is most needed in underserved communities – and who can refer patients with more complex needs to a dentist."

"Despite more than a decade of success in the U.S., out-of-date laws prevent dental therapists from employment in most states, including Ohio," said David Maywhoor, Project Director of UHCAN Ohio's Dental Access Now! campaign. "By allowing dental therapists to practice in our state, we can ensure that more children are not suffering from untreated tooth decay."

Dental therapist programs are designed to help expand access to dental care in underserved communities. In Alaska, they have increased access to 45,000 Alaska Natives who could not

get regular dental care before. In Minnesota, dental therapists have significantly increased care for underserved patients.

SB98 improves the dental care workforce to expand access to care in underserved areas by:

- Reducing unnecessary regulatory burdens on dental hygienists so they are able to provide their services to the full benefit of their education and training under general supervision of the dentist. This will allow hygienists to provide cleanings and preventive care in settings where a dentist may not be physically present.
- Allowing dental therapists to practice under the supervision of a dentist in Ohio.
- Allowing hygienists to take additional education and be licensed to practice as a hygienist and a dental therapist.
- Ensuring that the new providers are working in communities with the greatest need by focusing the practice of dental therapists to dental health professional shortage areas and with dentists who have 20 percent or more of their patient caseload from the Medicaid population.

“We hope Senate Bill 98 will quickly make its way through the legislature,” continued Maywhoor. “Ohioans cannot wait any longer to get the care they need.”

UHCAN Ohio is a statewide non-partisan, non-profit organization building the voice of consumers to achieve quality, affordable, accessible health coverage for all Ohioans. www.uhcanohio.org

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