



Dental Advocates Seek Scope Of Practice Changes To Address Coverage Gaps

July 23, 2015

With the demand for dental services expected to outpace Ohio's supply of dentists in the next decade, advocates called on the General Assembly Wednesday to modify the state's dental scope of practice laws.

Dental Access Now! Project Director David Maywhoor cautioned that without adding dental therapists and allowing dental hygienists to work at the top of their scope, Ohio could see even greater dental shortages by 2025.

"Unless we make changes to Ohio's dental workforce, the result will exacerbate the access problem for underserved populations who forego basic dental care because they don't live near a provider, they cannot pay for care or they have a limited oral health care understanding and literacy," he told reporters during a conference call.

"We know now that this will impact the overall health of Ohioans living in underserved communities."

Pointing to a U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration [report](#), Mr. Maywhoor said Ohio needs at least 235 more dentists to meet current demand.

Unlike the national trend, Ohio's dentist supply is expected to decrease over the next decade, going from more than 6,200 in 2012 to nearly 5,900 by 2025, he said. If this occurs, Ohio would be short more than 600 dentists to meet the demand - a decline he attributed, in part, to an aging dental workforce.

While the HRSA study suggests the supply of dentists is expected to fall short, the number of Ohio dental hygienists is projected to outpace need in the coming years, said Columbus hygienists Meagan Niezgodski.

According to HRSA data, she said, such an increase would leave 821 more hygienists than demand in 2025.

Competition, however, is already fierce for dental hygienist jobs in Ohio with many needing to take on several part-time positions, Ms. Niezgodski said. Increasing hygienists' scope of practice would allow them to find more work and to address the needs of Ohioans living in one of the state's 84 dental health professional shortage areas, she contended.

"Hygienists have the qualifications and training to work outside the private practice setting and work in the areas where the need for oral health care is strong, but the supply of dentists and dentist offices is not," Ms. Niezgodski said. "It's ironic to think of an oversupply of hygienists when so many Ohioans need basic preventative and restorative care.

"Freeing up hygienists to work in communities under the remote supervision of dentists can help ease the surplus while increasing access to care."

Montgomery-based dentist Barry Gibberman said in addition to modernizing dental practice laws so professionals can practice to the full extent of their education and training, Ohio should expand the dental team to include dental therapists, who would also work under a dentist's supervision.

Dental Advocates Seek Scope Of Practice Changes To Address Coverage Gaps – Gongwer

These mid-level providers, who are trained in preventative and routine dental care, would expand the dental team's reach, he said, adding that dental therapists have been successfully utilized in other states.

Mr. Gibberman urged lawmakers to support the group's proposed legislation and address dental shortages in the state. He pointed to the adoption of similar practice changes in other health fields.

"This addition to the dental team will provide a more efficient, community-based approach to help improve access to much-needed care," he said. "It is with urgency that we call on our lawmakers to address the dental provider shortage now so we don't fall further behind in the coming decade.

Mr. Maywhoor said while Dental Access Now! has drafted its proposed legislation, it's been working to identify a lawmaker to carry the measure. The organization announced a dental therapist legislative proposal last fall. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, October 8, 2014](#))

[Rep. Terry Johnson](#) (R-McDermott) and [Sen. Joe Uecker](#) (R-Loveland) previously sponsored companion bills (SB237, HB463, 130th General Assembly) that would provide incentives to dentists for working in underserved areas and expand the practice scope for some dental professionals. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, April 11, 2014](#))

The House's version of the bill, which among other things was modified to allow hygienists to apply desensitizing agents, cleared the legislature and was signed into law late last year. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, December 19, 2014](#))