



Report Sees High Demand, Low Supply of Ohio Dentists Growing over Next Decade

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Dental Access Now!, a statewide coalition and project of the Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio (UHCAN) Ohio, on Wednesday announced new data projecting the dental care workforce will see its supply of dentists outpaced by demand over the coming decade.

David Maywhoor, project director with Dental Access Now!, said in a conference call that a new report by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration estimates that all 50 states will see demand for dental care higher than the growth in supply of dentists.

“The growth and supply of dentists in 2025 will be smaller than that of demand, leading to significant unmet needs,” he said. “In Ohio, we are already experiencing a shortage of dentists, especially in [84 health professional] shortage areas.

“We need at least 235 more dentists to meet the needs of Ohioans today,” he said. Ohio had 6,260 dentists in 2012, and by 2025, Ohio is projected to have 5,887 dentists.

Nationally, both demand and supply of dental care services are expected to increase, but Ohio’s supply is slated to decrease. “So Ohio will be worse off than many other states,” Maywhoor said.

While demand for dental services in the state ratchets upward, it is worse for rural, low-income areas where there are not enough dentists to meet individuals’ needs there, he said. Without making legislative changes, Maywhoor notes underserved populations will see exacerbated problems, as poor oral health can increase risks associated with diabetes and cardiovascular disease, affect the health of babies for pregnant women, and can make finding a job difficult due to bad and missing teeth.

Maywhoor said the coalition has drafted legislation to “change how we provide oral health care,” and is seeking a legislator to sponsor it. The coalition is advocating for dental therapists, which are mid-level providers trained in preventive and routine dental care. He said dental therapists are authorized in Alaska and Minnesota, with many other states having similar bills currently moving through their legislative processes.

In contrast, the report also finds the supply of dental hygienists is projected to surmount the demand, with an excess of more than 28,000 full-time hygienists by 2025.

“Unlink dentists, the supply of hygienists is keeping up with demand,” said Meagan Niewgodsi, a registered dental hygienist in Columbus and recent graduate of Sinclair Community College.

To expand hygienists’ “scope of practice,” she said using the existing, qualified workforce to serve communities lacking dental care and allowing hygienists to gain additional training can modernize the industry’s model.

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“It’s ironic to think of an over-supply of hygienists when so many Ohioans need basic preventative and restorative care,” Niewgodsi said. “Training hygienists to work in communities under remote supervision of dentists can help use the surplus while increasing access to care.”

She noted Ohio dental hygienists are already dealing with unemployment issues, with some finding only part-time work and “fierce competition” in the state’s 12 hygienist programs. Niewgodsi said she works three to four days per week.

Dr. Barry Gibberman, a private practice dentist in Montgomery, spoke of concern over underserved Ohioans, asking lawmakers to address the dentist shortage issues now, as access to oral care is the top unmet health care need for children and low-income Ohioans.

“We also need to expand the dental team to include dental therapists,” he said, calling therapists efficient with a community-based approach. “Working under a dentist’s supervision, dental therapists expand the reach of the dental care team, providing routine services, including fillings, non-surgical extractions and preventive care.

“The health care workforce has adapted to demand and routinely uses mid-level providers, like nurse practitioners, to expand basic care in underserved communities. We need to do the same for dental care,” Gibberman said.

Maywhoor also noted a Pew Charitable Trusts report. “Part of the problem in Ohio is our dentist workforce is aging,” he said. In 2009, more than 42 percent of dentists in the state were 55 years or older and nearing retirement.