



Coalition Says Authorizing Dental Therapists Could Improve Access To Care

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Advocates urged lawmakers Tuesday to pass legislation to allow dental therapists to practice, a move they said would improve the access Ohioans have to dental care.

David Maywhoor, project director for Dental Access Now!, said allowing dental therapists to practice would expand the dental care team to include mid-level practitioners who are able to provide basic care under the supervision of a dentist.

Ohioans aren't visiting their dentists enough, he said, and part of that is because there aren't enough dental professionals.

"Studies show that Ohio's dental shortage is just going to get worse over the next decade," Mr. Maywhoor said at a Statehouse news conference. "We have to address the dental workforce or the shortage is just going to get worse."

The group said a bill is being drafted.

Mr. Maywhoor presented a poll, conducted by Fallon Research & Communications in January of 802 Ohio voters, showing that nearly 67% of voters supported allowing trained specialists to perform routine dental procedures such as filling cavities.

Dr. Ed Sterling, a retired pediatric dentist in Columbus, said dental therapists would be accredited by the same organization - the Commission on Dental Accreditation - that certifies dentists. Allowing them to practice would encourage more dental professionals to work in areas that don't have easy access to dentists.

"Adding dental therapists to the dental team will make it easier for children and families in underserved areas to get the quality dental care that they need," he said.

Dental therapists would receive at least three years of training after graduating high school and fulfilling some prerequisites, Mr. Maywhoor said. They would then have to fulfill a 400-hour preceptorship training with a dentist. When hired by a dentist, the dentist would set the scope of what the therapist can do and decide if the therapist can work remotely or only under direct supervision.

"All the way along the line there are protections that have been built into this so that it's the dentist's choice in how the team is working," Mr. Maywhoor said.

The Ohio Dental Association has expressed opposition to the plan, saying the therapists would be given too broad of a scope for their education. The group's president, Dr. Chris Connell, a general dentist from Lyndhurst, said in a statement that the state should give past legislation aimed at improving access to dental care (HB463, 130th General Assembly) a chance to work.

"Legalizing dental therapists 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," Dr. Connell said. "This

Coalition Says Authorizing Dental Therapists Could Improve Access To Care - Gongwer plan proposes inadequate training for such a broad scope of practice that includes irreversible surgical procedures such as the cutting of gum and tooth structure with a high speed drill, extractions and restorations."

Dr. Larry Hill, a public health dentist from Cincinnati, said the therapists would be held to the same standards as dentists, and that allowing them to practice would improve access to care.

"I think dental therapists are going to improve access to dental care in underserved communities," he said.

Minnesota and Alaska, two states that have had the programs for a while, have seen success, he said.

"It's time that we do something about this," he said. "We have a model. There's no evidence, there's not a stitch of evidence, to demonstrate that it's not a safe and cost-effective model."