



Group Supports Creation of New 'Dental Therapist' Provider; ODA Opposes Move

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Legislation is expected to be introduced in Ohio in April to create a new dental provider that supporters say will make dental services more available and lower the cost. "Dental therapists" are already at work in Alaska and Minnesota as well as in 54 other countries, Dental Access Now project director David Maywhoor explained at a Tuesday news conference in the Statehouse.

He said his group specifically supports modernizing Ohio dental practices "by giving hygienists more flexibility to practice to the full extent of their education and training and by expanding the dental team to include mid-level providers called dental therapists to practice in shortage areas."

The need has never been greater, Maywhoor said. Today, Ohio has 84 dental health professional shortage areas where there are not enough dentists to meet the dental health needs. He said this is up from 59 shortage areas identified in 2011. "When it comes to dental care, particularly for low-income and rural Ohioans, we have been falling behind," Maywhoor added.

He said backing is growing in the state with two-thirds of Ohioans supporting a new mid-level dental provider -- according to a new poll sponsored by the coalition and conducted by Fallon Research and Communications from Jan. 6 through Jan. 10.

He said the survey found that 41 percent of respondents do not see a dentist regularly with 12 percent of those saying they only see the dentist when they have a problem that needs to be treated.

Maywhoor commented that as of Tuesday, 86 different local and state organizations support the proposal, including hygienists, service providers, foodbanks, insurers, health care providers, groups representing both seniors and faith-based organizations.

Maywhoor was joined at the news conference by Dr. Edward Sterling, a Columbus dentist, and Dr. Larry Hill, a public health dentist from Cincinnati.

Sterling said the poll "confirms what we have been hearing across Ohio: Support for changing the law to allow for a new dental provider is not limited to any one demographic. Support is strong across gender, race, partisan affiliation, age and geography."

Hill noted that the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), which oversees other dental professionals, has recently issued education standards for dental therapy.

"Just as CODA accreditation ensures that dentists graduate at the highest standards possible, CODA accreditation assures that dental therapists will also graduate with the highest standards of quality. The approval of dental therapists is no longer

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a question of 'if' but rather 'when.' It is inevitable that we need to change the dental workforce model to meet the demands for care."

Maywhoor said that legislation creating the new dental professional is pending in 12 other states. In Ohio, the group is working with Sen. Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering).

In answer to a question, Maywhoor explained that a dental therapist would be part of a "dentist-led team" and would have a collaborative agreement with a dentist. Depending on what the dentist decides, the dental therapist could work remotely.

Maywhoor did say that the only opponent is the Ohio Dental Association (ODA), which released the following statement from ODA President Dr. Chris Connell, a general dentist from Lyndhurst, later on Tuesday:

“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. This 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. The General Assembly just passed 130-HB463 a little more than a year ago, which includes some of the nation’s most aggressive access to dental care reforms, including doubling the capacity of the Ohio Dentist Loan Repayment Program, which has already incentivized dozens of dentists to provide care in professional shortage areas, creating opportunities for expanded function dental assistants to provide preventive dental procedures to Ohio patients and allowing dental hygienists to initiate preventive dental care in underserved settings outside the presence of a dentist. These progressive reforms just became effective in March 2015 so let’s give them a chance to work.”