



## Poll Puts Some Teeth into Efforts to Expand Ohio's Dental Team

Written by: Mary Kuhlman, March 2, 2016

A new poll is adding some teeth to efforts to bring a new face to dental care in Ohio.

There are more than 80 dental health professional shortage areas in the state, where there are not enough dentists to meet the needs of the community. A statewide poll of 800 voters released Tuesday by the Dental Access Now coalition indicated that nearly 67 percent of Ohioans support changing the law to allow dental therapists to perform routine procedures, such as filling cavities.

Columbus-area pediatric dentist Dr. Ed Sterling said these trained specialists work under a dentist's supervision.

"The idea is to not only improve access to care," he said, "but also to free up the dentist's time so that the dentist's training and experience, which certainly exceeds that of a therapist, is spent in a more efficient way."

The poll, conducted by Fallon Research and Communications, showed strong support for the use of dental therapists across gender, race, age and geography.

Legislation is being drafted in Ohio to create a dental therapist provider model. Opponents have maintained that dental therapists lack the rigorous training of dentists, but Sterling said they are approved by the Commission on Dental Accreditation.

University of Florida College of Dentistry professor Dr. Frank Catalanotto has advocated nationally for the dental therapist model and contended that some of the resistance is a misunderstanding of the cultural and socio-economic barriers to oral health care. He added that there are also undue concerns about competition.

"There's a fear that they are going to take over and take away business from the dentist, and that's not really true," he said. "There are so many patients that are underserved that can't see a dentist because they can't afford it or geography. That fear is totally unfounded."

Of the 12 percent of poll respondents who only see the dentist when they have a dental problem, more than half cite cost or lack of dental insurance as the reason. But Catalanotto said dental therapists could expand services for hard-to-reach populations, including low-income families and children enrolled in Medicaid.

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Work continues to allow dental therapists to perform routine procedures in Ohio, such as filling cavities.

"Dental therapists are working for dentists and they see a lot of Medicaid patients, allowing the dentist to do good because of the lower cost of employing a therapist compared to a dentist," he said. "They can do this and survive quite nicely on Medicaid fees."

Dental therapists already are practicing in Alaska and Minnesota, and soon in Maine.