

# Dental Therapists in Community Health Centers: EXPANDING ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE FOR UNDERSERVED VERMONTERS



## What is a dental therapist?

A dental therapist is a provider who works as part of the dental care team, similar to how a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant works as part of the medical team. Dental therapists provide routine and preventive dental care, including some restorations and simple extractions.

## How does the dental therapist work as part of the dental care team?

Dental therapists work as part of a dentist-lead dental team, similar to how nurse practitioners work with the medical care team. Each dental therapist will have a supervising dentist and, with that dentist, will create an agreement detailing a work arrangement within the dental therapist's scope of practice. Dental therapists can practice in the clinic itself or off-site providing care under the dentist's supervision on mobile dental vans, in school clinics, and in nursing homes. Having a dental therapist on staff at a community health center brings new capacity and flexibility to the dental care team. By focusing on preventive care and basic restorations and extractions, they free up dentists to work on more complex procedures that only a dentist can do and get needed dental care into the community.

## Do dental therapists work in community health centers?

Yes, and they are increasing access to dental care. Currently, dental therapists are authorized to practice in Minnesota and Alaska, and Maine has recently passed midlevel dental provider legislation. Dental therapists practice in a number of community health centers and Medicaid reimburses for the services they provide.

## How can dental therapists help community health centers in Vermont increase access to oral health care?

Because dental therapists are relatively inexpensive to employ, they enable community health centers to offer dental care to low-income families and see more underserved patients. A 2013 Community Catalyst report found that 78 percent of patients seen by dental therapists in Minnesota were publicly insured.<sup>1</sup>



## Will Medicaid reimburse services provided by dental therapists in Vermont?

Yes. The Vermont Department of Health Access has stated that Medicaid will reimburse dental therapists for the services they provide.

## How do dental therapists promote health equity?

Dental therapists are community-based providers. They come from the communities they serve, and provide care that is both accessible and responsive. In addition, research shows that providers from communities of color and low-income or rural communities are likely to return to work in those communities.

## How will dental therapists be educated in Vermont?

Vermont's dental therapists will be educated at Vermont Technical College (VTC), which has more than a decade of experience providing high quality training for dental hygienists in Vermont. The VTC program will meet the Commission of Dental Accreditation standards for dental therapy education programs. By the time they begin practicing, dental therapists will have as much clinical experience in the procedures they are certified to perform as a dental school graduate.

A dentist will supervise each dental therapist, affirm their abilities and set their scope of practice through a collaborative management agreement.



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1 Kim, F. M., (2013). *Economic viability of dental therapists*. Boston, MA: Community Catalyst.  
2 The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2014). *Expanding the dental team: Increasing access to care in public settings*. Retrieved from [http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/Assets/2014/06/27/Expanding\\_Dental\\_Case\\_Studies\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/Assets/2014/06/27/Expanding_Dental_Case_Studies_Report.pdf).  
3 Wovcha, S. (2012). *Advanced dental therapy in Minnesota: An employer's perspective*. [PowerPoint slides].  
4 Ibid.


## Have dental therapists been successful in community health centers?

In Alaska and Minnesota, dental therapists are providing high quality care and expanding and preserving access for thousands of people, while reducing costs and increasing revenues for community health centers.

 The dental therapist at People's Health Center Services, a community health center in Minnesota, conducted 1,756 patient visits in her first year and generated \$30,000 in revenue from Medicaid patient visits alone—not counting the non-Medicaid patients she treated which comprised another 35 percent of the clinic's patients.<sup>2</sup>

 Children's Dental Services in Minnesota reports that:

- In 2011-2012, dental therapists provided care to more than 2,000 patients, of whom 84 percent were enrolled in Medicaid, 15 percent were uninsured, and one percent or fewer were privately insured.<sup>3</sup>
- Employing dental therapists for \$45 an hour compared to dentists at \$75 an hour allowed the practice to maintain and expand services in the face of declining Medicaid reimbursement rates.
- Each dental therapist saves Children's Dental Services \$1,200 a week.<sup>4</sup>
- The dental therapist model is working so well that Children's Dental Services is paying the tuition for additional dental therapists.

 The 2013 Community Catalyst report *Economic Viability of Dental Therapists* found that employing a dental therapist in a number of practices in Alaska and Minnesota costs less than 30 cents for every dollar of revenue generated on average.

Tomorrow's

# VERMONT DENTAL TEAM



## Dentist (DDS/DMD) • 500 competencies

Head of dental team; Provides routine & complex procedures and treatment.



## Dental Therapist • 34 competencies

Member of dental team; can work off-site. Provides routine treatment (e.g. cleanings & restorative care), preventive services, & oral health education.



### Extends Care to More Community Settings

Community Clinics & Private Practice



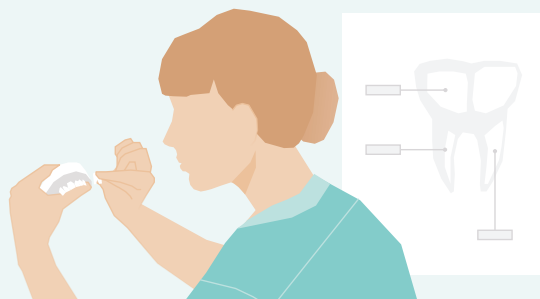
School Based Health Clinics



Mobile Dental Clinics

## Dental Hygienist (DH)

Provides oral health education, scaling & cleanings.



## Expanded Function Dental Assistant & Dental Assistant (DA)

Chairside support for dentist before & during treatment.



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