

Dental Therapists: Meeting Oral Health Needs in Underserved Communities

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?

Dentists supervise all dental therapists (DTs) in Alaska and Minnesota and most dental therapists practice off-site from their supervising dentist. This allows DTs to work in low-income and rural communities and in settings such as satellite clinics or school-based health centers where dentists may not be available to care for patients. In addition, having a dental therapist on staff allows more patients to receive preventive care and basic restorations and extractions while dentists perform more complex procedures that only a dentist can provide.

How do dental therapists increase access to oral health care in underserved communities?

Because dental therapists are less expensive to employ than dentists, community health centers and other safety-net providers can hire them to help serve more low-income families. A 2013 Community Catalyst report found that 78 percent of patients seen by dental therapists in Minnesota were publicly insured.¹ In addition, dental therapists bring services to patients in places where dentists don't normally work, including schools, nursing homes, mobile clinics, and other settings.

¹ Kim, F. M., (2013). *Economic viability of dental therapists*. Boston, MA: Community Catalyst.

How do dental therapists promote health equity?

Dental therapists are community-based providers. They come from the communities they serve, allowing them to provide accessible and culturally competent care. In addition, research shows that providers from communities of color and low-income, rural or tribal communities are likely to return to work in those communities. Seventy-eight percent of Alaska dental therapists are serving in their home communities with a retention rate of 81 percent over ten years.² The Alaska dental therapy education and care model makes dental therapy an accessible and sustainable profession for young people from those underserved areas.

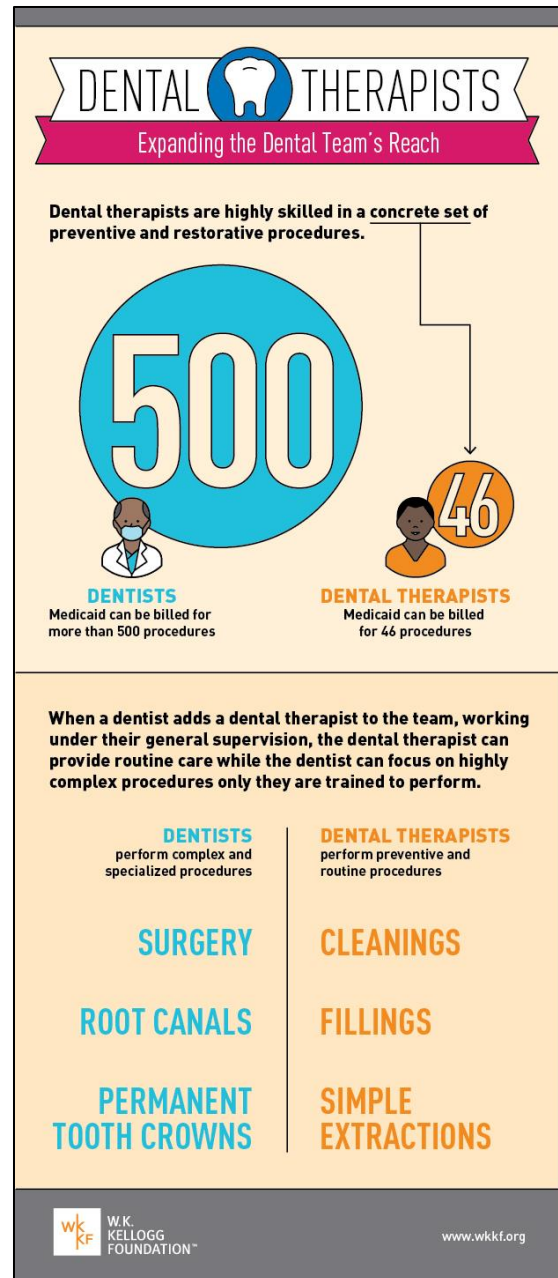
Why are dental therapy programs a good fit for community colleges?

- The dental therapy education program is deliverable in two years.
- Many community colleges have the necessary infrastructure—dental clinics and relationships with dentists who can train students and employ graduates.
- Dental therapy education programs provide a new career pathway for community college students to move into high-skilled jobs with good wages.
- Dental therapy programs offer rural community colleges an opportunity to further support their communities. Evidence shows providers from rural areas are most likely to stay and work there—offering local people an opportunity for a good job in their own community.

Is there a dental therapy program curriculum that community colleges can use?

The American Association of Public Health Dentistry convened an expert academic panel that created a model two-year, post-secondary education training program for dental therapy in 2011. The model includes the principles upon which a dental therapy program should be based:

² Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, personal communication.



the recommended length of training programs; the competencies required for graduates; and the general curriculum content of such programs. Community Catalyst also convened an expert panel that developed educational standards recommendations for dental therapy. Links to both these resources are available at the bottom of page 4 of this document, as well as a contact person for questions.

Who becomes a dental therapist?

In Alaska, dental therapists are young adults, frequently from Alaska Native villages. Because they are from the communities they serve, they are culturally competent providers and patients are very comfortable being treated by them. In Minnesota, students with the appropriate prerequisites can return to school to receive a master's degree in dental therapy.

Where do dental therapists currently practice?

A number of Minnesota federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) employ dental therapists and Medicaid reimburses for dental therapy services. Tribal health corporations in Alaska have employed dental therapists since 2005. Like FQHCs, Tribal health clinics serve a similar population of low-income, primarily uninsured or underinsured people who do not have access to regular dental care. Children's Dental Services, another nonprofit health clinic, as well as other provider systems in Minnesota have also employed dental therapists since 2011.

What value do dental therapists bring to communities?

- The dental therapist at People's Health Center Services, an FQHC 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, who made up another 35 percent of the clinic's patients.³
- In Alaska, dental therapists have expanded access to dental care to more than 40,000 Alaska Natives. In one tribal health center, dental therapists generate \$125,000 to \$245,000 in revenue a year after costs, including salary and benefits for both the therapist and a dental assistant and supplies.⁴
- 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.⁵

³ 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.

⁴ M. Williard, personal communication.

⁵ Wovcha, S. (2012). *Advanced dental therapy in Minnesota: An employer's perspective*. [PowerPoint slides].

- 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.⁶
 - 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.

Who can I contact if I am interested in learning more about dental therapy?

State and tribal groups across the country are working to bring dental therapists to their communities. Communities across Kansas, Ohio, New Mexico, Vermont and Washington as well as in Tribal communities nationwide are leading a range of activities. If you are interested in learning more about dental therapy efforts across the country, please contact:

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More Information on Dental Therapy Education:

<http://www.communitycatalyst.org/doc-store/publications/dental-therapy-education-standards.pdf>

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⁶ Ibid.