

Dental Therapists in Federally Qualified Health Centers: Strengthening Dental Care for 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.



Do dental therapists provide high-quality care?

Yes. The evidence is clear that dental therapists, who receive as much education for the specific set of services that they provide as a dental student, provide safe, competent, and high-quality care.

- A comprehensive review of more than 1,100 studies of dental therapists practicing in more than 50 countries found that they provide competent, safe, and effective care.¹
- A 2013 American Dental Association study recognized that “appropriately trained mid-level providers are capable of providing high-quality service,” and that dental teams with mid-level providers treat tooth decay more successfully than teams without them.²
- In 10 years of practice in Alaska, dental therapy patients haven't experienced any adverse events.³
- According to initial evaluations in Minnesota, dental therapists have improved patient satisfaction, and increased dental team productivity, while providing quality care.⁴

¹ Nash, D.A., Friedman, J.W., Kavita, M.R., & Robinson, P.G. (2012). *A review of the global literature on dental therapists*. Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

² Wright, J. (2013). A systematic review of oral health outcomes produced by dental teams incorporating midlevel providers. *The Journal of the American Dental Association*, 2013(144), 75-91.

³ M. Williard, personal communication.

⁴ Minnesota Department of Health. (2014). *Early impacts of dental therapists in Minnesota*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/dt/dtlegisrpt.pdf>.

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

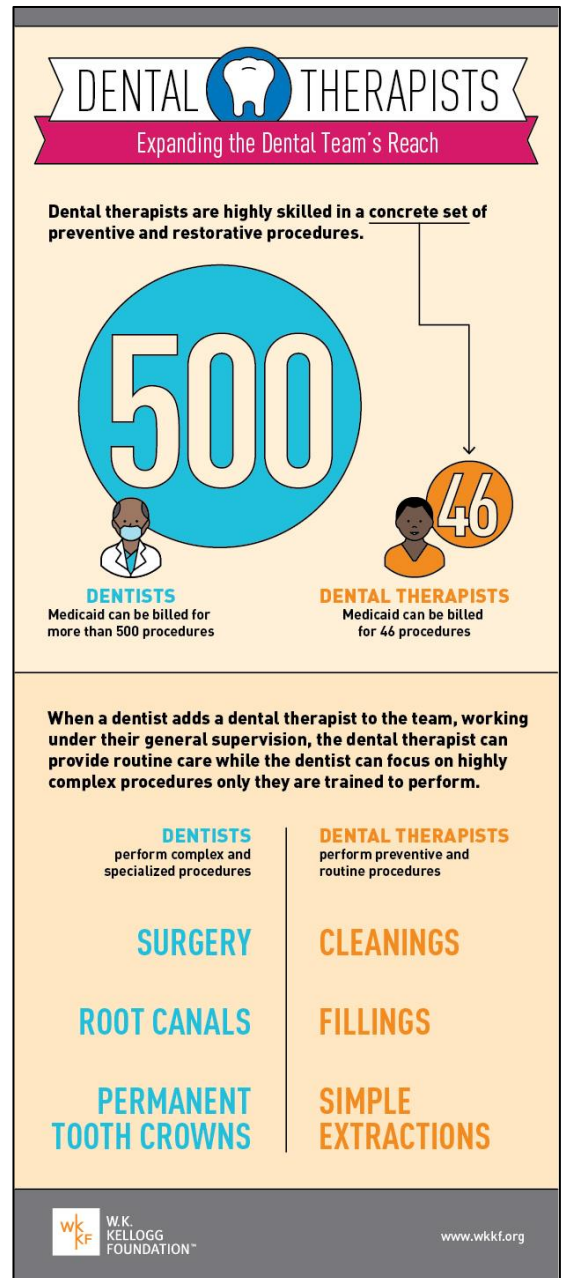
All dental therapists in Alaska and Minnesota are supervised by a dentist and most can practice off-site from their supervising dentist. This allows them to work in low-income and rural communities and in settings such as satellite clinics or school-based health centers where dentists don't always practice. Having a dental therapist on staff allows clinics to see more patients. While the dental therapist provides preventive care and basic restorations and extractions, the dentist is free to work on more complex procedures that only a dentist can perform.

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

Dental therapists increase access to dental care by enabling dentists and clinics to treat more patients in underserved communities. A 2013 Community Catalyst report found that 78 percent of patients seen by dental therapists in Minnesota were publicly insured.⁵ Dental therapists also bring dental care into communities where there are not enough dentists to see and treat patients.

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, 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.⁶ The Alaska dental therapy education and care model makes dental therapy an accessible and sustainable profession for young people from those underserved areas.



⁵ Kim, F. M., (2013). *Economic viability of dental therapists*. Boston, MA: Community Catalyst.

⁶ Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, personal communication.

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.

Are dental therapists currently working in FQHCs and other community-based clinics in the U.S.?

Yes. 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. Although tribal health clinics are not technically FQHCs, they 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 in Minnesota, has also employed dental therapists since 2011.

Have dental therapists been successful in FQHCs and other community-based clinics?

- 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 which comprised another 35 percent of the clinic's patients.⁷
- 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.⁸
- 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.⁹
 - 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.¹⁰

⁷ 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.

⁸ M. Williard, personal communication.

⁹ Wovcha, S. (2012). *Advanced dental therapy in Minnesota: An employer's perspective*. [PowerPoint slides].

¹⁰ Ibid.

- 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.