

IMPROVING ACCESS TO ORAL HEALTH CARE:

The Success of Alaska Dental Therapists

ALASKA DENTAL THERAPIST PROGRAM EVALUATION RESULTS

The first major independent evaluation of the Alaska dental therapist program, conducted by RTI International, found that dental therapists in Alaska are providing safe, competent, appropriate dental services. The two-year, intensive evaluation is the first major independent evaluation of its scale to assess care provided by dental therapists practicing in the U.S. Dental therapists receive two years of intensive training and provide prevention, education and basic dental care services, working collaboratively with dentists while extending their reach.

Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Rasmuson Foundation and the Bethel Community Services Foundation, the 2010 study confirms that dental therapists are filling a vital need in Alaska, expanding the reach of dentists and allowing those in remote areas – many of whom previously had little or no access to oral health services – to receive care. Using criteria derived from standards for assessing clinical competency for board certification of U.S. dental school graduates and common health research measures, the evaluation shows:

- **Dental therapists provide safe, competent, appropriate care.** Dental therapists are technically competent to perform the procedures within their scope of work and they are operating safely and appropriately.
- **Residents say access to care has improved.** Dental therapists are successfully treating cavities and helping to relieve pain for people who in the past had to wait months or travel many hours to seek treatment.
- **Patient satisfaction is very high.** Adults overwhelmingly reported a positive experience with dental therapists, giving them an average score of 8.86 out of 10 and they are well-accepted in tribal villages.
- **Dental therapists are well respected in their communities.** Because many dental therapists return to practice in their home communities, they typically have the cultural skills and language fluency needed to educate and motivate people towards behavioral change. They are viewed as role models and serve as important oral health advocates.

NATIONAL RELEVANCE

Shortages of dental professionals and affordable dental care are hurting the health of millions of Americans. In fact, close to 50 million Americans live in federally designated dental shortage areas where there are not enough dentists to provide routine oral health care. Severe shortages of dentists and of affordable dental care means that millions of people – particularly in rural and low-income communities and communities of color - live in pain, miss school or work, or face life-threatening infections.

Simply training more dentists will not solve this problem. The Alaska model is a community-driven solution that can work in communities across the country. As individual states consider ways to expand access to much-needed oral care, this evaluation suggests that alternative workforce models like dental therapists can be part of the solution.

- Dental therapists can expand the reach of the dental team, providing critically needed access to oral health care for vulnerable children and families.
- Dental therapists can provide treatment and alleviate pain for vulnerable families and children who have not had regular access to care in the past.

- Dental therapists often return to practice in the underserved communities where they grew up, providing an additional source of employment in remote communities, ensuring culturally appropriate care and serving as credible advocates of oral care in those communities.
- As communities across the U.S. consider options to expand access to oral health care, several states (including Kansas, Ohio, New Mexico, Washington and Vermont) are considering alternative models such as dental therapists. In 2009, Minnesota's state legislature created a dental therapist program.

DENTAL THERAPIST MODEL

Dental therapists work as part of the dental care team to perform basic dental procedures and provide prevention and education services under the general supervision of a dentist.

In Alaska, dental therapists have been providing preventive and basic dental care to families in remote Tribal villages since 2005. The Alaska program is based on a recognized and proven model that has been used internationally for over 80 years as a way to expand high-quality care to underserved children and families as part of a comprehensive system of care managed by dentists. Dental therapy is well-established in over 50 countries around the world, including industrialized countries with advanced dental care systems similar to the U.S., according to the World Health Organization.

This study confirms what numerous prior studies of dental therapists practicing in other countries have already shown: dental therapists provide safe care for underserved populations.

- Dental therapists receive rigorous training in a specific set of oral health care services. Under the general supervision of a dentist, dental therapists provide preventive services and perform cleanings, fillings and simple extractions.
- With a training emphasis on providing care for underserved populations, intensive clinical training and practice in the field, dental therapists receive at least as much hands-on training in their two-year program as dental students do in four years of dental school.
- After graduating and completing a 400-hour externship under direct supervision of a dentist, dental therapists are certified to provide a limited scope of dental services under general supervision of a dentist.
- Dental therapists' scope of practice includes a specific set of services, including cleanings, fillings, and simple extractions. The supervising dentist determines the services each dental therapist can provide while working remotely (under general supervision) based on their demonstrated skills and community needs.