

**TESTIMONY OF THE MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL SOCIETY BEFORE THE JOINT
COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH**

May 7, 2019

**S. 1215/H.1916 – AN ACT TO IMPROVE ORAL HEALTH FOR ALL MASSACHUSETTS
RESIDENTS**

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) supports Senate Bill 1215 and House Bill 1916, An Act to Improve Oral Health for All Massachusetts Residents. The MDS represents approximately 80% of dentists in the Commonwealth through initiatives in education, advocacy, and promotion of the highest professional standards. As the leading authority on oral health care in the Commonwealth, we take great pride in championing oral health and lending the voice of dentistry to worthy initiatives that can make a difference in the lives of residents across the Bay State.

That is why the MDS is proud to have worked with the sponsors of this legislation in crafting a commonsense solution for issues we face here in Massachusetts.

In 2017, the Massachusetts State Health Assessment reported:

“There are notable racial/ethnic disparities in oral health care utilization for children, adults, and pregnant women. Insurance status is often a barrier to accessing oral health care, along with lack of adequate transportation to attend an appointment. Improving access to oral health services and preventive measures, such as community water fluoridation, is important to preventing and treating oral disease.”

This comprehensive legislation focuses on providing care for underserved populations and reducing socioeconomic barriers to seeking dental care.

Key Provisions

This comprehensive approach to improving oral health would create a new class of midlevel providers called dental therapists, while enacting commonsense requirements to protect patients. It also calls for oral health education for community health workers, education and assistance for local and regional boards of health related to community water fluoridation, and information for parents on the importance of children’s oral health.

Midlevel License

The MDS is proud to be the first state dental association to seek legislative approval of a midlevel practitioner license. We believe this proposal for dental therapists is one part of a broader solution. But we also believe that dental therapists cannot and will not succeed unless Massachusetts residents are assured that appropriate standards and safeguards are applied to dental providers who treat underserved populations, particularly children.

We are assured that this legislation requires dental therapists to achieve a master's degree, similar to their counterparts in the medical field, physician assistants. Furthermore, similar to dentists, dental therapists will need to pass a comprehensive, competency-based clinical examination prior to gaining licensure. This will ensure dental therapists are capable of completing the appropriate procedures prior to treating patients outside of a classroom clinical setting.

The newly created dental therapists would be required to work under direct supervision of a dentist for a period of time before they are authorized to perform under general supervision. To successfully improve access to care for certain Massachusetts populations, dental therapists will primarily treat underserved residents.

Comprehensive Approach

Although some residents have limited access to dental care services in a few specific locations in Massachusetts, the true concern is the other barriers faced by patients. Therefore, only a multifaceted approach will succeed in the Commonwealth. To increase oral health awareness, this legislation requires community health workers to receive oral health education or training. Additionally, public schools will be required to notify parents or legal guardians of the importance of oral health screenings and to provide information on programs and services that offer access to affordable dental care.

As the MDS has stated in the past, the solution to the problem is not simply to drill and fill. The ultimate solution needs to include more efforts related to prevention. That is why this legislation would increase awareness of the health benefits of fluoridated water in public drinking supplies. Local and regional boards of health must be provided information, education, technical assistance, and seminars regarding water fluoridation as requested by municipalities and other local and regional government entities.

Conclusion

Massachusetts is best served by requiring dental therapists to work in partnership with licensed dentists as part of a comprehensive approach to care that includes oral health education, disease prevention, and readily available access to fully-trained and accredited dentists. The oral health issues faced by some Massachusetts residents cannot be solved by a simple, one-pronged solution. Only a comprehensive solution will make a substantial impact, and that is why the MDS is proud to support this comprehensive legislation.