

Kids Forward, Badger Institute: Dental therapy would provide access to the many Wisconsinites who lack dental care

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Wisconsin is one of the worst-performing states in the country at providing dental care for disadvantaged kids

CONTACT: Julie Grace, Badger Institute policy analyst, at 414-225-9940 or at julie@badgerinstitute.org

By Julie Grace and Ken Taylor

If you've ever had a toothache, you know how debilitating it can be. Everyday activities like eating, working and sleeping become a challenge. Unfortunately, this is a painful reality for thousands of children in Wisconsin — one of the worst-performing states in the country at providing dental care for disadvantaged kids. Fortunately, other states have modeled a reasonable and effective solution: dental therapy.

We have a dental access problem in our state. In 2017, only 43% of children receiving dental benefits through Medicaid received care. That's among the lowest rates of dental treatment nationwide for children who receive care through public insurance. In 2018, over 1.2 million residents (more than 20% of the state's population) lived in communities designated by the federal government as dental care shortage areas. Sixty-four of Wisconsin's 72 counties have at least one designated dental shortage area.

Lack of dental care often leads to excessive, ineffective and costly visits to the emergency room. Children who lack access to dental care especially suffer. Studies have found that a child's academic performance is negatively affected by dental problems.

There's a simple solution to this wide-reaching health care problem. Allowing dental therapists to practice would give more Wisconsinites — especially children of color and children furthest from opportunity, rural and low-income residents — access to care that was previously out of reach for them financially and/or geographically. It also would allow experienced dentists more time to focus on complicated cases and procedures.

Similar to nurse practitioners and doctors, dental therapists are licensed mid-level professionals who work under dentists to provide basic oral treatment at a lower cost. If dental therapists were allowed to practice in Wisconsin as both Gov. Tony Evers and some Republican legislators have proposed, the benefits would be wide-reaching and monumental.

Dental therapists are already practicing with measurable success in Minnesota and other states. Since they began practicing there in 2011, patients are seeing reduced wait times, especially those in rural areas. Dental therapists also saw nearly 90% of uninsured or publicly insured patients, and research has shown that the quality of care received from dental therapists is at least as high as that received from a dentist.

According to a Pew survey, 71% of Americans said they would be willing to receive dental care from dental therapists. In addition to support from both Wisconsin Democrats and Republicans, the policy has the backing of health care groups and insurers, hospitals, local governments, schools, businesses and think tanks.

These days, it seems like there are few societal problems that can bring together such bipartisan support, but this is one of them. When groups as diverse as ours can agree that we are facing a problem and how to solve it, what can possibly stand in the way? Now is the time to pass this common-sense legislation and get people the dental care they deserve.

Our broad coalition of more than 50 Wisconsin-based organizations is ready to continue educating the public and policy-makers on this issue. Our newly launched website (dentalaccesswi.org) has information about how increasing access to dental

care would benefit our state.

Now that the budget process is complete, Wisconsin legislators should look for a bipartisan win. Fortunately for them, there's already one awaiting them.

Ken Taylor is executive director of Kids Forward. Julie Grace is a policy analyst for the Badger Institute.