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For Immediate Release

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Expanding Oral Health Access Through Dental Therapy at Community Health Centers

Madison, WI – The Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPHCA) is pleased to support Senate Bill 181, introduced in the Wisconsin legislature today, which allows the licensure of dental therapists in Wisconsin. WPHCA is the member association for Wisconsin's 17 Community Health Centers which provide oral health, primary care, and behavioral health services to over 300,000 Wisconsinites each year.

Wisconsin's oral health needs apply to both children and adults. In Wisconsin, one in three children are living with untreated dental decay and one in five third graders have untreated dental disease. Despite the efforts being made statewide by dentists in private practice, at Health Centers, and in other settings, Wisconsin has consistently ranked in the bottom decile in terms of the rate of Medicaid-enrolled children who see a dentist each year.

Community Health Centers are committed to increasing access to oral health care in our state. In 2019, Wisconsin Health Centers provided over 445,000 dental visits, accounting for over one-third of all Health Center encounters. Approximately 57% of patients served by Community Health Centers are Medicaid enrollees, and 19% are uninsured.

"Access to oral health care has always been a top priority for Community Health Centers," said Stephanie Harrison, CEO of WPHCA. "We are confident that trained, licensed dental therapists will be a valuable addition to Health Centers, helping to increase access to oral health care, particularly in low-income communities. We are appreciative of Senator Felzkowski and Representative Plumer's leadership on this issue, and for the cross-sector support for dental therapy in Wisconsin."

WPHCA believes that inclusion of dental therapists within the Community Health Center model would allow dentists to focus on the most complex procedures, while dental therapists would assist in routine treatment, check-ups, and other services within their scope, without sacrificing quality of care. Adding dental therapists could shorten wait time for patients, provide cost-effective preventive and routine restorative care, and improve community health.

Lake Superior Community Health Center, which includes sites in both Wisconsin and Minnesota, started to include dental therapists in their practice in 2014. "We have previously had the pleasure of working with dental therapists in our Minnesota dental practices and they had a profound impact on our wait times." said Jessie Peterson, Interim CEO for Lake Superior Community Health Center. "For example, our wait times for restorative care dropped from 36 weeks to 6 weeks. Dental Therapy allowed us to complete treatment plans faster, which is a great benefit to both our organization and our patients."

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