

Dental Therapists

A potential approach best utilized as part of a comprehensive statewide oral health plan

Dental Therapists At-a-Glance

Dental therapists are mid-level providers who work under varying levels of dentist supervision, accepting responsibility for patient diagnosis, treatment and coordination of dental services

VISION AND INPUT

Colorado should create a strategic oral health vision to guide policy solutions.

Decisions about public investments in oral health, including the addition of dental therapists, should be made based on evidence to achieve Colorado’s vision and address Colorado’s specific needs.



Additionally, Colorado should receive input from the consumers, communities, and stakeholders served by proposed policy solutions. Several new federal and state reports also should be considered in the creation of any oral health plan and any dental legislation for Colorado.

Colorado has a strong history of innovative approaches to improving oral healthcare — efforts that have not yet fully realized their potential to positively impact oral health.



Prevention and Patient Education

Colorado has focused heavily on prevention, but more work needs to be done.



Delivery System Reform

Colorado’s dental community has collaborated to achieve the most expansive scope of practice for dental hygienists in the country, which includes independent practice, prescriptive authority and some noninvasive restorative care. Opportunity remains to expand telehealth, integrated care, and school-based healthcare for populations in geographic areas that are not yet served.



Workforce Diversity and Shortages

Pathways to address shortages could include pipeline programs, educational subsidies, hybrid online education, practicums, mentorships, and loan forgiveness (some efforts under way).



Payment Reform

Coverage expansions for Medicaid adults, CHIP+ and senior dental have had significant positive impacts on dental access. Additional work remains to create comprehensive coverage in dental plans, expand plan annual caps, ensure sustainable reimbursement in public programs, etc.



Examples of Innovative Models of Oral Healthcare in Other States

- Community-based dental access models
- Oral health delivery in non-traditional settings
- Medicaid reimbursement increases
- Student loan support/forgiveness
- Streamlining of provider credentialing
- Use of CDHC and EFDA provider types



Defining the Different Roles: Oral Health Services Provided by Job Level



	EDUCATION	SCOPE	SUPERVISION
Dentist	3-4 years undergraduate and 4 years accredited dental school, plus any applicable residencies	Provides all preventive, diagnostic and restorative services, in addition to irreversible surgical procedures	No supervision
Dental Therapist	Education varies from 18 months to a master’s degree, however an accredited program is 3 years.	Varies broadly among states	Dentist supervision
Dental Hygienist	2-year accredited associates degree or 4-year accredited bachelors degree	Preventive services, prescriptive authority for preventive measures, some non-invasive restorative interventions	Independent practice (with collaborative agreement for advanced procedures)
Dental Assistant	On the job training or 10 week certificate program	Assistance with dentist assigned tasks, radiographs with training certificate	Dentist supervision

Key Policy Questions to Consider

What is the reach?

Thirteen states currently have dental therapist models. However, only **5** of those states have practicing dental therapists.

States With Dental Therapist Legislation (Year) and Number of Practicing Dental Therapists:

Alaska (2005)	Maine (2014)	0	Idaho (2019)	1
 35	Washington (2015)	8	Montana (2019)	0
	Vermont (2016)	0	Nevada (2019)	0
Minnesota (2009)	Michigan (2018)	0	New Mexico (2019)	0
 100	Arizona (2018)	0	Oregon (2020)	3
	Connecticut (2019)	0		

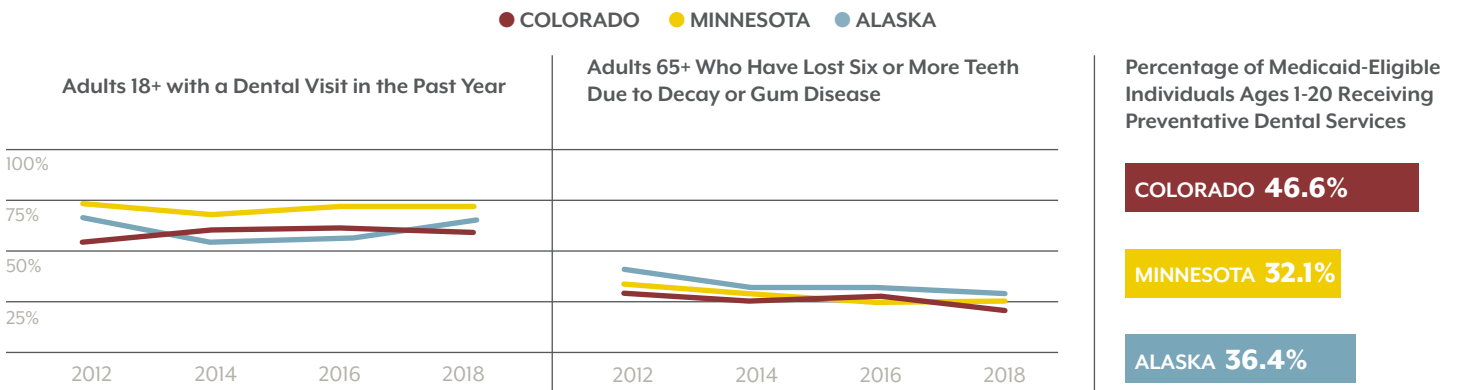
Limits to practice settings are common in states with dental therapists. Some states use them exclusively for service to Tribes; others focus on underserved patients via FQHCs and CHCs.



Could dental hygienists and dental assistants fill some or all of the presumptive roles of a dental therapist with the removal of practice barriers?

What is the Impact?

Access to care and dental health outcomes between Colorado and the states with the most dental therapists



What are the Barriers?

Accredited Dental Therapist Training Programs require **at least 3 years of academic study**, as well as ongoing licensing, training, and supervision.

It is not enough to simply create dental therapist opportunities. Long-term investments in infrastructure to sustain providers beyond implementation are vital.

76.8% of Coloradans had dental coverage in 2021.

Despite gains in coverage, there are persistent barriers to care in addition to workforce shortages that fuel ongoing challenges in Colorado, including:

-  Coverage Limitations & Understanding Benefits
-  Transportation
-  Racial/Ethnic Disparities
-  Fear of Pain
-  Socioeconomic Status
-  Geography

Download **Exploring the Addition of Mid-Level Providers: A Report to the Colorado Dental Association** (prepared by the Wynne Health Group), which provides a deeper dive into the information presented on this sheet. cdaonline.org/midlevel

Lauren Testa, Wynne Health Group
724-787-7299 • lauren@wynnehealth.com

Jennifer Goodrum, Michael Best Strategies
303-999-6553 • jbgoodrum@michaelbeststrategies.com