

Dear Dr. Tooks and Members of Commission on Dental Accreditation:

We write to you as a national group of educators, dentists, dental hygienists, health advocates, and community members who are deeply invested in the betterment of our nation's oral health. We would like to first thank you again for adopting national dental therapy standards. This was an important step forward in the effort to improve access to dental care for all Americans.

We are writing to you now to urge the Commission to continue moving forward, and to implement these standards.

As the Commission considers implementing national standards, it is critical to understand there is a significant need for better access to routine and preventive dental care. With 181 million Americans going without a dental visit in 2010 according to the American Dental Association, we need to pursue innovative approaches to delivering care.

Dental therapists are already making a significant impact in expanding access to care for underserved populations. There are currently three dental therapy programs training dental therapists in the United States: two in Minnesota, and one in Alaska. Since the passage of legislation in Maine last year, we anticipate additional training programs launched within the next two years. Each program is graduating competent providers. In Minnesota the two programs have produced 42 graduates and it is anticipated that by 2016 there will be 71 graduates. In Alaska, 25 dental therapists are practicing and have increased access to care for over 40,000 Alaska Natives.

A 2014 Minnesota Department of Health report showed that dental therapists help increase access to care. It also noted that employing dental therapists benefits dental practices: it increases a practice's ability to see Medicaid patients, increases the total number of patients, increases team communication, allows dentists to perform more complicated procedures while delegating routine care, and provides a cost benefit that helps practices offset low Medicaid rates^[1].

As the dental therapy movement spreads and gains momentum, there is more need than ever for national standards to be established and enforced. Over 15 states are currently exploring emerging workforce models to address their dental needs. Rather than continue to progress on a state-by-state basis that requires state dental boards to certify and/or accredit educational programs in each respective state, we urge CODA to implement standards and a national accrediting process for dental therapy education programs.

Sincerely,

Health Action New Mexico

