Dear Senator Gerratana, Senator Somers, Representative Steinberg, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee,

My name is Marcia Lorentzen, Dean of the Fones School of Dental Hygiene, University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT. I am writing in support of Proposed Bill S.B. No. 40, AN ACT CONCERNING CERTIFICATION OF DENTAL THERAPISTS.

The Dental Therapist (DT) is a midlevel dental professional intended to provide oral health care in a defined scope of practice. The new Dental Therapist has been passed into law in four states: Alaska (1999), Minnesota (2009), Maine (2014), and Vermont (2016). Each of these states have determined that a Dental Therapist is a logical solution to delivering quality care to individuals who for assorted reasons have oral care needs that have gone untreated. Dental therapists practicing in Alaska and Minnesota have proven to be an exceptional gateway for providing more treatment for their neediest citizens. The creation of this dental professional as an option in Connecticut for employment in selected dental practices and increasing availability of affordable dental treatment services is a good plan.


Although the process of education varies in the states that have enacted this use of this provider into law, the training is rigorous and involves didactic instruction and clinical experience. In 2015, the Commission on Dental accreditation issued guidelines for dental therapy calling for a minimum of three academic years of education without specifying a degree requirement. The standards additionally include an advanced standing pathway for dental hygienists [http://www.communitycatalyst.org/resources/publications/document/CommunityCatalyst_DT_Report.pdf](http://www.communitycatalyst.org/resources/publications/document/CommunityCatalyst_DT_Report.pdf); [http://www.ada.org/~/media/CODA/Files/dt.pdf?la=en](http://www.ada.org/~/media/CODA/Files/dt.pdf?la=en). The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) reported on the supply and demand for dentists and dental
hygienists in early 2015 estimating a serious shortage of dentists in 2025, even with the potential for new dental schools to open, and an oversupply of dental hygiene graduates. “HRSA is supporting the training of advanced dental hygienists who will expand dental hygienist roles to maximum allowable under state scope practice laws.”

Minnesota established the first dental hygiene based Dental Therapy program, in addition to a baccalaureate degree program. Vermont has a curriculum in place and is the process of being established. The University of Bridgeport supports advancing the role of dental hygiene professionals by providing education for this midlevel provider practice category. Fones School of Dental Hygiene is fully accredited by NEASC and the CT Office of Higher Education, with the entry level clinical program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). In collaboration with the UB Clinics, health professional education at the University of Bridgeport is of high quality and provides services to the community most of whom are uninsured, underinsured, and of very limited financial means.

Our practice partners – Southwest Community Health Center and Yale New Haven Hospital Hamden Dental Center – are supportive of legislation to create the dental therapist. These facilities and other agencies with whom we have practice agreements look forward to the day when Fones School of Dental Hygiene student/interns can provide restorative treatment to their clients in addition to the education and prevention that will continue to be rendered. With full understanding of the oral and overall systemic link, these training partners look forward to their clients benefiting from an advanced practitioner’s skills. As Katherine Yacavone, Executive Director, Southwest C. H. Center – Community Agency, wrote to me on September 20, 2016, “Southwest has supported this effort. In terms of fit with the dental practice at SWCHC, I can reach out to the dental team for their input and get back to you. Thank you. Kathy (kyacavone@swchc.org)

Additionally, the members of the Primary Care Action Group, Greater Bridgeport Area Community Health Improvement Plan, Access to Health Care Workgroup, which include health care providers and facilities (Bridgeport Hospital, St. Vincent’s Hospital, Stratford Health Department, Visiting Nurse Services of Connecticut, Southwest CH Center, Optimus Health Care, Fones School of Dental Hygiene and others) are fully supportive of increasing the ability of their clients to access effective and substantial preventive and treatment services. The Primary Care Action Group cited many instances of clients not having the dental support needed for their conditions, eroding teeth due to use of inhalers for asthma, gingivitis/periodontal disease related to uncontrolled diabetes, and periodontal pathogens complicating cardiovascular disease. In addition to these issues, it is reported that many clients use immediate care centers and hospital emergency rooms to address dental pain resulting in palliative treatment with pain medicine and no location for referral of treatment.

In the 2016 Primary Care Action Group report special chapter Fairfield County Community Wellbeing Index 2016, access to dental care dominated focus group discussions, specifically the high cost and limited number of providers for adults on Medicaid and Medicare. Low income respondents were six times more likely to use the hospital emergency department for dental emergencies. Those who need it most are limited in their ability to access dental care. 

As Dean of the Fones School of Dental Hygiene, and a licensed dental hygienist, I am seeing the inadequacies in the delivery of needed dental treatment for individuals with behavioral, emotional, medical, financial and mobility, including transportation, challenges. Establishing the certification requirements for the Dental Therapist in Connecticut is a pathway to addressing these challenges. A curriculum for Dental Therapy that meets the CODA standards can be offered through the University of Bridgeport. The facilities in which we educate dental hygiene students provide the foundation for meeting the educational plan and expected credentialing requirements for the Dental Therapist:

1. Provision of clinical and diagnostic services in addition to those services permitted to an entry level dental hygienist, including services that require advanced clinical decision making, judgment, and problem solving.

2. Completion of a clinical and academic educational program beyond the first professional degree required for entry level licensure which qualifies the dental hygienist to provide advanced practice services and includes preparation to practice in direct access settings and collaborative relationships.

3. Documentation of proficiency such as professional certification.

As a dedicated dental hygiene professional, and Dean of an academic program educating dental hygienists to be the future work force in Connecticut, and other states, I ask for your support of Proposed Bill S.B. No. 40, AN ACT CONCERNING CERTIFICATION OF DENTAL THERAPISTS.

Sincerely,

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