



Fones School of Dental Hygiene

March 11, 2019

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

My name is Marcia Lorentzen, Director of the Fones School of Dental Hygiene, University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT. I am writing to ask for your support of legislation to establish the practice of dental therapy: **H.B. No. 7281, An Act Concerning the Practice of Dental Therapy by Licensed Dental Hygienists** and **H.B. No. 7303, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Department of Public Health Regarding Dental Practitioners.**

I have participated with other dental hygienists in working with the Department of Public Health to develop statutory language establishing the practice of dental therapy. As a licensed profession in the state of Minnesota since 2009, the first state to license dental therapists (DT) and advanced dental therapists (ADT), two independently operated universities in Minnesota have educational programs in dental therapy, the first class graduating in 2011. Minnesota dental therapists are working in a variety of safety net settings¹ serving low-income and underserved patients and communities, including community health centers, schools, head start programs, hospitals, nonprofit dental clinics and private dental offices serving low-income patients.

¹ "The Institute of Medicine defines the health care **safety net** as: 'Those providers that organize and deliver a significant level of health care and other related services to uninsured, Medicaid, and other vulnerable populations' (IOM, America's Health Care **Safety Net**: Intact but Endangered, 2000)."

More states have passed legislation for the dental therapist as it has been determined that the dental therapist is a logical solution to delivering quality care to individuals who for assorted reasons have oral care needs that have gone untreated. As state dental therapy models were being considered, a determination that consistent national standards was needed ultimately resulted in American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) proposed and approved Accreditation Standards for Dental Therapy Education Programs.

Dental health aides in Alaska and dental therapists and advanced dental therapists practicing in Minnesota have proven to be an exceptional gateway for providing more treatment for their neediest citizens. In addition to these two states, dental therapy legislation has passed in Maine (2014), Vermont (2016), and Michigan (2018). 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. Minnesota established the first dental hygiene based Dental Therapy program; Vermont has a curriculum in place and is the process of being established. 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.

The University of Bridgeport is vested in the dental hygiene program and supports health career development and advancement. In October 2018, Fones School of Dental Hygiene hosted a Dental Therapy Town Hall Forum to engage the collaboration of health care providers, dentists, community health center personnel, public leaders and policy makers, students, and faculty. The meeting spurred much discussion for making the dental therapist a reality in Connecticut. The dental therapy curriculum is now standardized, and results in Minnesota since the first graduates in 2011 confirms passing the rigorous dental competencies for the dental therapy scope of practice, licenses being granted in Minnesota, and an increasing number of citizens are receiving the treatment needed in expanding locations of service.

HRSA supports the training of advanced dental hygienists who will expand dental hygienist roles to maximum allowable under state scope practice laws. Southwest Community Health Center, a local community partner, has been supportive of legislation to creating the dental therapist, with interest expanding the practice agreement from dental hygiene clinical rotations to include the same for the dental therapy student. Practice agreements allow interns to provide supervised treatment planning and scope of practice treatment to their clients in addition to the education and prevention services. 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.

Members of the Access to Health Care Workgroup of the Primary Care Action Group, Greater Bridgeport Area Community Health Improvement Plan (Bridgeport Hospital, St. Vincent's Hospital, Stratford Health Department, Visiting Nurse Services of Connecticut, Southwest Community Health Center, Optimus Health Care, and University of Bridgeport) are supportive of increasing clients' access to cost 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, many reports indicate that 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.

As Director 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 practice of dental therapy by licensed dental hygienists (H.B. 7281), the dental therapist in Connecticut is a pathway to address the challenges. Following the CODA Accreditation Standards for Dental Therapy Education Standards, the dental hygienist has the foundation for meeting the educational plan and competencies 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.

I am a dedicated dental hygiene professional and director of an academic program that educates students to become dental hygienists. Our graduates could become the advanced work force in Connecticut to treat the disparities in oral health care. I ask for your support of **Proposed Bills H.B. No. 7281, An Act Concerning the Practice of Dental Therapy by Licensed Dental Hygienists** and **H.B. No. 7303, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Department of Public Health Regarding Dental Practitioners**.

Sincerely,



Director, Fones School of Dental Hygiene
The First School of Dental Hygiene
College of Health Sciences
University of Bridgeport
60 Lafayette Street, Room 411
Bridgeport, CT 06604
203-576-4138
marcia@bridgeport.edu