

Dental Therapy Fact Sheet

What is a Dental Therapist?

- Highly-trained licensed providers that provide routine dental care like exams and fillings and oral health education to the community.
- Part of a dental team that complements the work of dental hygienists and dental assistants and frees dentists up to focus on more complicated care. They are often compared to physician assistants and nurse practitioners in medicine.

How are Dental Therapist Educated and Trained?

- The Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), the same body that approves education programs for dentists, passed national accreditation standards for dental therapists in 2015.
- Dental therapists can be trained in community colleges, making education accessible and affordable and creating well-paying jobs in underserved communities.
- Currently, five schools in the U.S. are graduating providers, three in Minnesota, one in Alaska, and one in Washington. Several more colleges are preparing programs, and some Connecticut public and private schools have expressed strong interest.

Who do Dental Therapist Serve?

- Dental therapists can work in a variety of settings, but they are specifically trained to extend routine care into chronic shortage areas like high-poverty and rural communities and settings like schools, nursing homes, community health centers, and mobile clinics.

Are Dental Therapists and Dental Hygienists the Same?

- No. Broadly speaking, dental hygienists are experts on the soft-tissue (gums) and prevention, while dental therapists primarily focus on the hard surfaces (the teeth) and filling cavities.
- These different specialties are why there are separate tracks for education. However, some schools offer dual-track education programs or give advanced standing for hygienists who wish to pursue dental therapy.

How many States have Authorized Dental Therapy?

- Dental therapists are authorized in at least some settings in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Michigan, Minnesota, Maine, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington. Over a dozen other states and Tribal governments are in the process of exploring the authorization of dental therapists.

How can Dental Therapists Help in Connecticut?

- There are currently over 800,000 children and adults enrolled in Medicaid and eligible for oral health services, but two-thirds of these adults and a one-third of children do not see a dentist each year. An untreated cavity may cause more serious and costly health problems. Dental therapy focuses on providing services and outreach to individuals from underserved communities to meet these critical needs.
- Many low-income and rural communities and public health settings struggle to recruit and retain dental providers. Dental therapists are cost-effective to train and employ, enabling dentists and community health centers to see more Medicaid patients, reduce patient wait times, and divert emergency room usage.
- Dental therapy focuses on building a dental workforce from the communities they serve, which will improve equity and diversity in the oral healthcare field. Research has shown that patients want to be treated more by people who look like them and/or come from similar communities.

Why is the Current Connecticut Law an Obstacle to Dental Therapy?

- Dental therapy is authorized in CT statute, but there is not a licensure program. This prohibits employers from hiring dental therapists because of liability concerns and being unable to bill for services.
- There is also a requirement that a dental therapist must also maintain a license as a dental hygienist, which is not consistent with national accreditation standards. This requirement could make the educational cost out-of-reach for many potential dental therapists and increases employment costs.

Policy Recommendation for Connecticut:

- Establish a dental therapy license and update requirements to align with federally recognized accreditation standards that remove the hygienist prerequisite to becoming a therapist.
- These changes are necessary for developing the profession in CT, financing the services through billing, and allowing Connecticut's academic institutions to create the most cost-effective and beneficial programs for students and their future employers and patients.

i Commission on Dental Accreditation. Accreditation Standards for Dental Therapy Education Programs. February 2015.

ii Connecticut Dental Health Partnership. Outcomes and Future State. Presentation to the Council on Medical Assistance Program Oversight on January 10, 2020.

iii American Dental Association. Oral Health Care System: Connecticut. 2015.

iv Harvard Medical School. Hidden dental dangers that may threaten your whole body. January 2020.

Dental Provider Comparison

	Dental Hygiene	Dental Therapy	Dentistry
Prerequisite	0-1 year of college classes	0-1 year of college classes	Bachelor's degree
Minimum length of education program (per the CODA accreditation standards, the US Dept of Education accepted accreditation standards)	2 academic years	3 academic years	4 academic years
Number of procedures the provider can perform	~40	~75	~500
Expertise	Focus on Gums and Preventive routine care, i.e. cleanings	Focus on Teeth and Restorative routine care, i.e. fillings	Focus on Teeth and Expansive Restorative care
Anticipated Annual Compensation, Informed by Education Costs	~\$77,000 ⁱ	~\$77,000; ~\$120,000+ if dual degree required	~\$164,000 ⁱⁱ

ⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Dental Hygienists. Updated May 1, 2020.
Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/Healthcare/Dental-hygienists.htm#tab-1>

ⁱⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Dentists. Updated May 1, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/dentists.htm>