

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testimony of Beth Pearce on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
March 22, 2023

Supporting:
**LD 1026, “Resolve, To Direct the University of Maine System to Establish a
Dental Therapy Degree Program”**

Sponsored by Representative Mastraccio

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Beth Pearce, Oral Health Program Manager at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA).

MPCA is a membership organization that includes all of Maine's 20 Community Health Centers (CHCs), also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Maine's CHCs make up the largest independent primary care network in the state, providing high quality and equitable primary and preventive medical, behavioral, and dental health services for over 200,000 people (1 in 6 Mainers) at more than 70 service delivery sites in all 16 Maine counties.

Oral health care access remains a priority for MPCA and our Community Health Center Network in Maine. As an organization, we are focused on supporting CHCs with the expansion of MaineCare's comprehensive adult dental benefit. This includes providing workforce trainings, addressing health equity needs, and ensuring that CHC voices are included at relevant state-level meetings.

Maine is experiencing workforce shortages in many health care professions, and dental providers are no exception. Rural areas, in particular, are experiencing critical challenges with access to care. As more adults have access to the expanded dental benefits, the health centers' patient population and the complexity of the patient needs have increased. CHCs are doing everything they can to ensure that patients receive the quality treatment they deserve, but waitlists continue to be long across the state.

Dental therapists are mid-level providers that can perform restorative procedures and some extraction procedures. Their work in a dental practice can alleviate the many demands on general dentists, allowing them to focus on the more complex procedures. This leads to each provider type working to the highest scope of their licensure.

The first and only dental therapist in Maine is working at a Community Health Center under the supervision of staff dentists. This new staff member has become so important that the health center plans to only hire new general dentists who support this staffing model.

Dental therapists have proven very valuable in improving access to care. An example is the Alaska Dental Therapy Program that began in 2004 in response to a need for regular oral health care in the Alaska Tribal Health System. More than 40,000 rural Alaskans now have regular access to dental care from a dental therapist.¹

¹ [Alaska Dental Therapy Program](#)

Unfortunately, one of the barriers to getting more dental therapists in Maine is a lack of access to education. There are no programs in our state or neighboring states to provide this training. If Maine is to truly overcome the oral health workforce challenges, we need to provide educational opportunities like those found in Alaska.

When looking at medical schools, we know that the majority of individuals who completed residency training are practicing in the state where they did their training. Nationally, from 2012 through 2021, this was 55.2% of individuals; in Maine, the rate was even higher at 57%.² We believe having a dental therapy program established in Maine would also encourage students to remain in the state and practice where they learned.

On behalf of Maine's Community Health Centers, thank you for considering our comments. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly at bpearce@mepca.org with any follow up questions.

Beth Pearce
Oral Health Program Manager
Maine Primary Care Association

² [AAMC Report on Residents](#)