

Dianne Smallidge  
York  
LD 1026

To: Members of Maine's Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs  
From: Dianne Smallidge, RDH, EdD, and Professor/Dean Forsyth School of Dental Hygiene/MCPHS  
Date: March 22, 2023  
Subject: LD 1026

I had hoped to speak to you in person today, however my schedule did not allow me to attend the hearing during the afternoon. I have been a licensed DH in Maine for over 35 years. For 23 of those years, I have had the privilege to teach dental hygiene students. I began teaching at UNE, my alma mater, in 1999, and in 2008 I left UNE to become a full time faculty member at the Forsyth School of Dental Hygiene in Boston. Currently I serve as the Dean at Forsyth, but still reside here in York, Maine. During my tenure in higher education, I have learned a lot about the access to care issues that underserved populations have faced in our region, and this has led to my work in the development of ideas on how educators can play a role in addressing this issue. In fact, I conducted research and published a study in 2018 about the interest and readiness of DHs in Maine to enter a program and step into the role of dental therapist. <https://jdh.adha.org/content/92/3/6.full>

My focus with this testimony is not to share facts about issues surrounding access to oral health care in our state. Many of you, and many of your predecessors already demonstrated your knowledge and wisdom about this issue, and this is how the previous legislation enacted the dental therapy provider into being in Maine. Instead, I'm here submitting this testimony to let you know that there is no reason why a higher educational institution in our state cannot move forward and provide training for dental therapists. My study from 2018 revealed dental hygienists are more than ready to begin their dental therapy education and become license dental therapists. The only barrier has been finding an institution to step up and open a program.

Last week I attended the American Dental Education Association's annual session in Portland, OR. The subject of Dental Therapy was discussed frequently, and many of my colleagues, particularly those from Minnesota, said to me, "Dianne, why aren't there any schools in Maine willing to train dental therapists"? My answer, "That's a great question. I don't know why there isn't an institution in Maine willing to move forward with a dental therapy program."

One argument I have heard is that it costs too much to open a program. I disagree. There are resources already in place at our institutions, FQHCs and other clinical sites that could support a dental therapy program. A new clinic or classroom setting doesn't need to be built. I've also heard the argument that creating a curriculum would be costly and time consuming. I worked on a project where we created a dental therapy curriculum designed to allow practicing DHs to continue working while going to school, and becoming a DT in just 2 years. Yes, the accreditation process can be lengthy, up to 2 years in length, but this shouldn't be a barrier to starting the process. If you would like to learn more about the curriculum I developed with my fellow DH educators at Forsyth I would be glad to discuss this with you. I should also note that it's not just dental hygiene educators who would like to see dental therapy move forward. A vast majority of dental school faculty are ready and willing to move forward with dental therapy programs. In fact, I had a conversation with the Dean of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, Dr. Will Giannobile, just last week, and he asked me where we are with dental therapy. Leaders in dental education want to see dental therapy programs move forward.

Can you answer the question I was asked over and over again last week? Can you think of a reason that we should not open a dental therapy school in the State of Maine? We as dental educators stand ready, and have been standing ready, to open dental therapy programs, and are ready to challenge any arguments we have heard regarding why we shouldn't move forward with a dental therapy program here in Maine. Let's finish the job started by Maine legislators and find a way to train the providers we know can address the access to oral health care issues in our state. Thank you for your time, and please don't hesitate to call on me if I can assist further in providing information in support of this legislation.