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March 22, 2023

***Testimony of Rep. Anne-Marie Mastraccio presenting
LD 1026, Resolve, To Direct the University of Maine System to Establish a Dental Therapy
Program
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs***

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Anne-Marie Mastraccio, representing House District 142, which includes parts of the City of Sanford and the Village of Springvale. I am here today to present LD 1026, Resolve, To Direct the University of Maine System to Establish a Dental Therapy Program.

Dental therapists (DT's) are dental hygienists who have continued their training and education at one of three accredited programs in the US. They have an expanded scope of practice that includes the performance of dental exams, simple restorations, diagnosing cavities, cleanings and prevention education. Their training is held to the same standards as a dentist.

Dental therapy was first recognized and approved as a profession in Maine in 2014. LD 1230 was introduced by former Speaker Mark Eves and cosponsored by Senator David Burns of Washington County in the first session of the 126th Legislature. The merits of dental therapy and its place in the oral health delivery team were debated and decided; a strong bipartisan coalition led to the bill being signed into law by former Governor Paul LePage on April 14th, 2014. The law was amended in 2019 in order to facilitate practice by DT's in our state, with the result that two Minnesota trained dental therapists relocated to Maine.

It was always my hope that the only dental school in our state, a school that also offers a dental hygiene program, might step up and expand their offerings to include DT. However, that has not happened. We cannot wait any longer. We have dental hygiene practitioners all over Maine and New England who would be drawn to a program offered by the University of Maine. We already train dental hygienists and expanded function dental assistants in our system, and the framework is in place to add this necessary piece of the dental team. Training more dentists is not the answer. Look at the data produced by Penobscot Community Health Care. In 2021, ten dentists and ten hygienists performed 10,890 preventative and restorative visits and 217 crowns and root canals. After downsizing in 2022, there were four dentists, one dental therapist and six hygienists performing 8,749 preventative and restorative visits and 222 root canals and crowns. DT's clearly improve everyone's effectiveness and allow for optimal use of time and abilities. Dental therapists will be the bridge to finally achieving cost effective access to oral health care for everyone.

It was not my choice to direct the university system to establish this program. I know there are many requests and only so much money. However, I believe this program deserves consideration and would prove its value for the people of Maine. Perhaps the committee would prefer to give the university and interested parties an opportunity to study how to best implement an accredited training program, with a report back to this committee in early 2024. If this is the direction the committee chooses to take, I would be available to participate in any study group.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to working with you all.

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Forging New Territory

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Mar

15



Four months after graduating with a bachelor's in dental hygiene and a master's in dental therapy, Claire Roesler moved from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Bangor, Maine, where she joined Penobscot Community Health Care (PCHC) as its first dental therapist. As a result, Claire has the esteemed designation of being the first dental therapist to work in the State of Maine. The state adopted legislation in 2014 recognizing dental therapy as a profession; however, the legislation had to be amended

in 2019 to allow dental therapists to practice.

Like all new paths being forged, there were certainly bumps along the way. Claire spent the first four months performing hygienist work while PCHC negotiated a collaborative management agreement with a clear scope of work to practice as a dental therapist. During her first year, Claire advocated extensively for dental therapy in Maine.

While Bangor is Maine's third largest city, PCHC provides dental care to nearby rural communities. It's not unusual for a patient to drive two to three hours one-way to receive routine and emergency dental care. Many of the patients seen from 2020 to 2022 needed emergency dental work due to the lack of available dental appointments during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a dental therapist, Claire worked closely with PCHC’s Executive Clinical Director of Dental Dentistry, Matt Offman. When asked how Claire impacted PCHC’s services, Dr. Offman stated, “Working alongside Claire and having a dental therapist as a part of the dental team was instrumental in opening access to care for the communities we serve in Maine. She bridged a gap that afforded patients to be seen in a timely manner by an exceptional clinician. We look forward to continuing to expand access to care and the dental therapy profession here in Maine.”

Like many healthcare providers, PCHC remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic but experienced staff shortages. For example, in 2022, PCHC’s dental team was reduced significantly by six dentists and four hygienists. Yet, it could still provide critical services due to having a dental therapist on staff.

Year	Dental Care Team	Preventative	Restorative	Crowns	Root Canals
2019	10 Dentists; 9 Hygienists	10,920	7,756	117	203
2020	8 Dentists; 9 Hygienists	5,763	3,925	108	41
2021	10 Dentists; 10 Hygienists	6,634	4,256	149	68
2022	4 Dentists; 1 Dental Therapist; 6 Hygienists	5,448	3,261	134	88

While Claire recently moved back to Minnesota to perform dental therapy with Compass Dental in Cannon Falls, the impacts she contributed as Maine’s first dental therapist are clear. She is excited to return to clinician work that she could not perform in Maine and be closer to her immediate family.

PCHC recently welcomed Brooklynn Johnke to its team as its new provisional dental therapist.

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