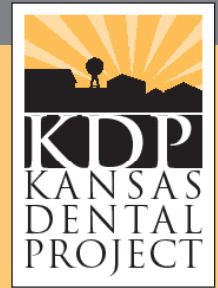


Filling the Gap

Addressing the dental workforce shortage in Kansas

House Bill 2280

Senate Bill 192



Because of population shifts, many communities in Kansas are facing a workforce shortage problem. Over the past few decades, rural communities in particular have been losing their grocery stores, their retail shops and their community hospitals. They're losing their local dentists, too.

We have a dental workforce shortage in Kansas.

Despite charity care and incentives to recruit dentists to smaller communities, the lack of access to dental care remains a challenge for most communities. In fact, 91 Kansas counties no longer have enough dentists to serve their residents. Fourteen of those counties have no dentists at all.

Our dental workforce shortage is compounded by the fact that only 25% of Kansas dentists accept patients insured through Medicaid. Comparatively, almost 90% of Kansas physicians accept Medicaid patients as part of their practices. Furthermore, the vast majority (63%) of Kansas dentists practice only in urban areas. Over time, the gap has continued to grow between the handful of urban counties that have an adequate number of dentists and the remainder of the state's counties, where the dental needs of residents are largely unmet. The shortage of dentists in Kansas is only expected to worsen over the next decade as the dental workforce continues to age and fewer dentists opt to practice in non-urban areas.

The dental workforce shortage is resulting in serious health problems for Kansans.

Without access to a dentist, hundreds of thousands of Kansans go without dental services, which often leads to more serious health problems. That's because dental health isn't just about teeth. We know that untreated dental problems can result in major medical problems, including heart disease, diabetes and stroke. And, dental-related problems continue to burden our community hospitals and clinics through costly emergency room visits and uncompensated care. In fact, at least 6,000 ER visits per year can be attributed to dental-related problems.

Vulnerable Kansans – such as senior citizens, the disabled and children – are particularly affected by the lack of access to dental care in Kansas. When it comes to children, for instance, poor dental health can lead to lifelong medical problems and greatly impact their ability to learn in school. In Kansas, 55% of third-graders have experienced tooth decay despite the fact most have dental insurance.

What is a Registered Dental Practitioner?

Registered Dental Practitioners operate in partnership with dentists much like the partnership between nurse practitioners and medical doctors. Dental therapists are permitted to operate under the general supervision of a dentist. Registered Dental Practitioners are trained to provide evaluation and preventive services, including inspection; dental radiography; cleaning above the gum line; and basic restorative services, such as tooth preparation (drilling), tooth restoration (filling) and non-surgical extractions. Registered Dental Practitioners are not permitted to do the advanced restorative services that only dentists provide, such as root canals.

This is a problem we can solve in Kansas.

Unlike some of the other workforce shortage problems facing our state, the shortage of dentists is a problem we can solve – not just with a quick fix, but with a long-term solution that's proven to work. Other states have begun to address their dental workforce shortages by adding a new member, a mid-level provider, to the dental team. And, for decades, 50 other countries have been successful in utilizing mid-level providers to improve access to dental care. We can solve this workforce shortage in Kansas and provide more Kansans with access to dental care by creating a Kansas model for a mid-level provider known as a Registered Dental Practitioner.

It's a solution that's both cost-effective and proven to work.

Registered Dental Practitioners could never replace dentists, but they can be a critical part of the dental team, working under the general supervision of a dentist to handle routine services, like fillings and non-surgical extractions. The Registered Dental Practitioner model provides dentists with the opportunity to grow their practices and see more patients, with the support of a skilled dental team behind them. And, it lets dental practices provide routine care in a more cost-effective setting – much like nurse practitioners working alongside nurses and medical doctors.

The Registered Dental Practitioner model is a cost-effective and proven way to improve the health of Kansans. Not only does the model offer opportunities to train local people who can return to their hometowns to find work under a supervising dentist, but it also offers an opportunity to provide rural and underinsured Kansans with the quality, affordable dental services they need.