

To: Senator Felzkowski, Chair, and members of the Senate Committee on Insurance, Licensing and Forestry

From: Disability Rights Wisconsin, Barbara Beckert – Director Milwaukee Office

Date: March 16, 2021

Re: Testimony in support of SB181 Licensure of Dental Therapists

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is the designated Protection and Advocacy system for Wisconsinites with disabilities. DRW is charged with protecting and enforcing the legal rights of individuals with disabilities, investigating systemic abuse and neglect, and ensuring access to supports and services.

Chair Felzkowski and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony in support of SB 181, and the potential for dental therapists to improve access to dental care for Wisconsinites with disabilities.

DRW appreciates the Legislature's efforts to address oral health care disparities in Wisconsin, and we are pleased to support SB 181 as a component of policy changes to increase access to dental care. Authorizing the licensure of dental therapists in Wisconsin will increase access to dental care for underserved populations, and will help to address the severe dental care access issues faced by many people with disabilities.

Many Wisconsinites with disabilities face challenges in obtaining regular dental care, resulting in many preventable extractions, a high incidence of periodontal disease, and other reduced health outcomes. DRW frequently receives calls from people with disabilities and their families who are unable to access dental care and are seeking assistance in finding a provider. It is very encouraging to see that SB 181 proposes that Dental Therapist would prioritize serving patients on medical assistance, uninsured, those living in long-term care facilities, people who have trouble accessing dental care because of a disability, or veterans.

Reimbursement rates for dental procedures in Medicaid are low, and as a result, a small number of dentists willing to accept these rates. The Department of Health Services issued a Medicaid Plan for Monitoring Access to Fee-for-Service Health Care in 2016. DHS found that only 37% of licensed dentists in Wisconsin were enrolled in the Medicaid program. Of those dentists that were enrolled as Medicaid providers, the majority (53%) were either inactive or had only limited participation. Limited access has led to real oral health issues for people with disabilities.

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Based on data in the Wisconsin State Health Plan, *Healthiest Wisconsin 2020*, 29% of adults with disabilities reported having at least one permanent tooth removed over the past year. Twenty-six percent said they had not visited a dentist within the past year. Adults with a disability are also less likely to visit the dentist for a cleaning, check-up, or exam than people without disabilities.

Minnesota has utilized dental therapists and found that 80% of new patients seen were on Medicaid and that dental therapists were more likely to work in settings such as non-profit or community-based practices that served underserved populations. The experience in Minnesota further supports the potential for dental therapists in Wisconsin to be utilized in community based settings that can provide greater access to dental services for children and adults with disabilities.

We commend the Legislature for your work to advance a planful approach for building provider capacity and improving access to oral health care. In addition to the important proposal to authorize licensure of dental therapists, DRW has worked with the Survival Coalition of Disability Organizations to identify additional strategies for improving access to oral health care for people with disabilities.

We ask for your consideration of the following:

- Increasing the number of dentists and facilitates that accommodate sedation dentistry.
- Improving the Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental care.
- Correcting the current inequity in the SSI Managed Care Program (dental care is included in SSIMC in some southeast Wisconsin counties but not in the other SSI MC counties).
- Expanding the availability of dental care at community health clinics.

Thank you considering our comments in support of SB 181. We look forward to working with you to advance policies to improve access to quality dental care for people with disabilities. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or suggestions.

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