

# ADDRESS THE ORAL HEALTH ACCESS CRISIS

Too many kids and families can't find a dental professional to meet their needs

In all but one of Washington's 39 counties, there are too few dental professionals to meet demands. And now COVID-19 is adding to health care inequities that already hurt people of color, low-income families, and rural communities.

Dental therapists are community-based oral health care providers who expand culturally and linguistically appropriate care to those who need it most. Dental therapy creates jobs and provides care for communities that have been hit hard by the pandemic.



*I have four molars left, and three of them are broken—all but one have broken during the pandemic. The teeth hurt; one of them has a sharp edge and is rubbing against my tongue; and I can't eat on that side of my mouth. I'm looking for someone to place a crown, but no private local dental practice will take my insurance. I have to find someone to do that pro bono or on a sliding scale. To get the crown placed at a sliding-scale clinic, I'd have to travel all the way to Seattle because our local clinic doesn't do crowns.*

**—Christianna Clinton, Oak Harbor**

*My 15-year-old daughter had one of her front upper teeth coming in sideways. It was painful and scary; she needed surgery urgently. But the only oral surgeon to take her insurance was in Seattle, three hours away, and we couldn't wait for the local surgeon to perform the procedure. So we drove to Bellingham, two hours from home, where we saw a provider who did not accept her coverage. We paid \$800 out-of-pocket, which exhausted my wife's health savings account. Now all the other health care for her, myself, and our two daughters this year must come out of our limited budget.*

**—Jeremiah Donier, Freeland**



*When our local dentist sold his business, the new dentist declined to accept patients with Apple Health for Kids insurance—even prior customers. So my granddaughter, who care for, lost her dental home. She hasn't seen a dentist in two years. The local hospital opened a dental clinic, but when we contacted them we learned they had a waitlist of 1,200 patients. I'm on Social Security and earn a limited income from three part-time jobs; I may have to put my granddaughter's checkup on a credit card.*

**—Patricia Holder, Port Townsend**

*When I got access to health coverage through Medicare, at the age of 24, it was my first time seeing a dentist since I was 17. At a local clinic, they told me I had severe gingivitis. However, due to insurance/caseload, it took the next year and a half to get my teeth cleaned. I am currently dealing with dental challenges that should have been addressed when I was a teenager. I am lucky that I have the income now to get these procedures covered, but it is frustrating that I couldn't deal with these issues sooner.*

**—Lily, Seattle**



## Washington lawmakers: Authorize dental therapists to bring oral health care to communities statewide.

### Washington Dental Access Campaign



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For more information: Cassidy Christopher, Children's Alliance



206.324.0340



cassidy.christopher@childrensalliance.org

