

ESTABLISH DENTAL THERAPY

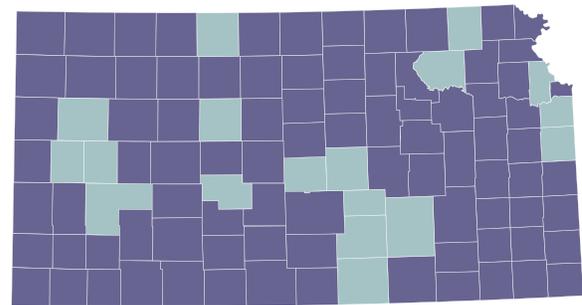
Kansas can improve children's health with dental therapists



Regular dental care is critical to the overall health and well-being of Kansas children and families. More than 1.4 million Kansans—including 342,000 Kansas children—live in counties without enough dental providers to meet their needs. It is time to act. Kansas Action for Children and the Kansas Association for the Medically Underserved provide leadership for the Kansas Dental Project, an initiative to improve oral health in Kansas by addressing our state's dental workforce shortage. Kansas can improve children's oral health by allowing Kansas dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists: highly trained mid-level dental providers who work with a dentist's supervision to offer routine dental services.

ORAL HEALTH MATTERS FOR KANSAS CHILDREN

Every Kansas child deserves regular dental care to ensure good oral health and prevent dental emergencies. Unfortunately, many Kansas families struggle to access routine dental care. Some families live in communities that lack dental providers—87 of Kansas' 105 counties do not have enough dentists to meet their needs, and fourteen Kansas counties do not have a dentist at all. Parents working at jobs with inflexible hours may not be able to take time off for a long drive to a dentist's office. Families with children insured by KanCare may not be able to find a dental provider who will accept their insurance. In fact, federal data indicates that more than 161,000 Kansas children covered by KanCare did not report receiving any dental care in 2015.



83% of Kansas counties
need more dental providers

Foregoing routine dental care risks Kansas children's overall health and well-being. Dental decay is the most common chronic childhood illness—five times more prevalent than asthma. Dental pain can make it difficult for children to concentrate in school, eat healthy foods, and live an active life. No Kansas child should have to live with constant, debilitating toothaches because they can't see a dental provider.

DENTAL THERAPISTS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Kansas lawmakers have the opportunity to improve oral health for all Kansans, including Kansas children. Dental therapists are highly trained dental providers who work with the supervision of a dentist to offer routine dental care, like filling cavities. They are trained to the same standards as dentists on a smaller number of procedures, and are already working in other states to improve access to dental care. Kansas could allow our state's dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists, ensuring more Kansas children get the dental care they need to be healthy.

When dental teams employ dental therapists, they can serve more patients. Dentists will be able to lead their teams and focus on delivering more complex care, while dental therapists will be able to provide some of the routine care currently provided by dentists. Since dental therapists cost less to employ than dentists, they allow the entire team to operate more cost-effectively. As a result, safety net clinics can serve more patients, and private practices can better serve patients with KanCare insurance—even though KanCare reimburses at a lower rate than private insurance.

Dental therapists can also improve access to care by bringing dental services directly to children. Dentists can authorize dental therapists to work with general supervision, allowing them to provide care in schools, early childhood settings, rural areas, and other underserved areas. This means dental therapists can provide necessary services to those with the most-limited access to dental care.

Other states' experiences prove dental therapists improve children's health. In Alaska, children in communities served by dental therapists receive more preventive care than their peers in other towns. Their health improves as a result. Research from the University of Washington School of Dentistry shows that Alaska children served by dental therapists need fewer tooth extractions and less use of general anesthesia—in other words, they access the routine care they need to stay healthy, avoiding more complicated dental problems that require more complex treatment. Kansas should allow dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists, so that Kansas children can realize these benefits too.

IT IS TIME TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE IN KANSAS

Every Kansas child and family, regardless of where they live or how much money they earn, deserves regular, high-quality dental care. For children, poor dental health can lead to lifelong medical problems and risk their overall well-being. Kansas policymakers should recognize that too many Kansans struggle to access dental care and allow Kansas dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists, so that all Kansas children can get the oral health care they need.