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HEALTH COMMISSION

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To: Oregon Legislators

From: Tribal Health Commission Chair, Shawna Gavin *Shawna Gavin*

Re: CTUIR Letter of Support for Dental Therapy

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Tribal Health Commission, we are requesting your support for House Bill 2528, legislation allowing the licensing of dental therapists in Oregon. This legislation is the product of a legislative workgroup tasked with answering questions and clarifying sections of SB 1549, a similar bill introduced in the 2020 legislative session.

Since last year, the oral health crisis in Oregon has only become worse because of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected dental clinics, frontline oral health care workers and patient populations previously facing disproportionate health disparities. Additionally, the impact of this pandemic on tribal, federal and the Oregon state budgets makes it necessary consider evidence-based solutions that help, rather than hurt, those budgets.

Dental therapy is proven to be one of those solutions by:

- improving the patient experience of care;
- increasing access and improving oral health outcomes;
- building an oral health workforce with providers recruited from and returning to their communities; and
- reducing the cost of care.

Since the 2020 legislative session, evidence is growing to support this model of care. In August, the Alaska Dental Therapy Education Program, where dental therapists participating in the Oregon Tribes Dental Therapy Pilot Project were trained, earned accreditation from the American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA). The Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) is the national authority on professional standards and education curriculum for the entire dental profession. It oversees standards for the entire dental care team of regular and pediatric dentists, hygienists, oral surgeons, orthodontists and more. This is the first time a dental therapy education program has earned CODA accreditation. The accreditation should put to rest any concerns about dental therapists receiving adequate training to safely provide services within their scope of practice.

We are collaborating with healthcare providers, oral health professional associations, community-based organizations and oral health educators across the state to support a policy that is informed by other state and Tribal efforts that precede this bill. To that end, we are committed to policy that ensures the following outcomes:

- Use of Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) standards as the measure of qualified dental therapy education programs. This allows for accessible education pathways for non-traditional students from underrepresented communities;
- Recognition of Tribal Sovereignty;
- General supervision for the full scope of dental therapy services to achieve maximum benefits to patients, clinics and providers; and
- A pathway to licensure for Oregon Pilot Project dental therapists that does not interrupt services currently being provided.

With the successful Oregon Tribes Dental Therapy Pilot Project set to expire in May 2022, it is time to pass dental therapy statewide. Even with allowed extensions to the pilot, it has become overwhelmingly clear that the administrative and financial resources to deliver care in a pilot setting are working against optimal oral health care delivery for those clinics that have participated. Time that providers are spending on oversight and reporting could instead be spent on direct patient care.

House Bill 2528 does not require any health care systems to employ dental therapists. It merely clears the way for Tribes and other underserved and underrepresented communities to choose to incorporate this provider into their oral health teams. There is much work to be done to turn the tide on oral health care disparities in Oregon, and dental therapy is one solution we urge you to support.