

Dear Oregon Legislators,

The Iñisaġvik College Alaska Dental Therapy Educational Program became the first dental therapy program accredited by the [Commission on Dental Accreditation](#) in August 2020. This accreditation was earned from the same Commission that accredits dental hygiene and dental schools. The program is a three academic year program in which students earn an Associate's Degree in Applied Science. Graduates are often called Dental Health Aide Therapists (DHATs) or dental therapists. Dental therapy students who graduate from a CODA accredited program need to be able to provide the same standard of care for the services in their scope of practice (examples: sealants, fillings and extractions) that a dentist would provide. During the education program at Iñisaġvik College dental therapy students get over 1000 hours of clinical experience in their scope of practice which includes about 50 billable procedures.

Alaska has been employing DHATs since 2004. Over the past 15 years DHATs have been providing care to Alaska Native people across Alaska and have led to an improved access to care for nearly 40,000. In regards to safety, there has never been a supported claim of malpractice while thousands of services have been provided. Recent research published by [Dr. Donald Chi](#), a professor of Oral Health Sciences at the University of Washington School of Dentistry, also shows that DHATs working in communities lead to improved health outcomes for community members. Specifically, the more days a DHAT is working in a community is associated with more prevention procedures being completed and fewer extractions being completed.

In 2004, the first Alaska DHATs were educated at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. New Zealand started training mid-level dental providers in 1921. The University continues educating and utilizing dental therapists in their country today. Then in 2007, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium in partnership with the University of Washington started a Dental Health Aide Therapists Educational Program in Alaska. That original program has evolved into the current Iñisaġvik College Alaska Dental Therapy Program. Over the past 13 years there have been 63 graduates who practice in Alaska, Washington and Oregon.

There have been extensive research and reviews completed on DHATs and dental therapists. In 2008 Dr. Ron Nagel collaborated on a paper that was published in the *International Dental Journal* that examined the practice of Dental Therapy in 52 countries. In every case these providers work under general supervision without the dentist present. Expanding access and creating a safety net by necessity calls for the establishment of more entry points into the oral health care system. To increase access, Alaska DHATs are able to practice where there are no dentists; yet are part of a team of dental providers lead by a dentist. The DHAT scope of practice is based on the needs of the population. The ability to address pain, infection and the function of teeth (fillings and extractions) is very important for patients who have experienced lack of access to dental care. Preventive programs must engage the patient to effectively support long term behavior changes. However, in order to achieve this engagement, the immediate needs of the patients must be met.

In April 2012, Dr. David Nash et.al through the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation published a monograph titled, [“A Review of the Global Literature on Dental Therapists, In the](#)

[Context of the Movement to Add Dental Therapists to the Oral Health Workforce in the United States.](#)” This review included over 1000 articles written in the U.S. and abroad on the practice of dental therapists. The review found overwhelming evidence that using dental therapists as part of the dental workforce decreased the cost of care, and improved access to care. It further showed that the public values the role of the dental therapist and that the universal tradition has been a two-year educational program for dental therapists.

In summary, the available evaluations and evidence suggests that mid-level dental providers like the Alaska DHATs deliver safe, competent and appropriate oral health care. The ability to practice under general supervision has been critical to increase access. Equally important has been the ability to provide critical services that will address pain, infection, oral function, and meet the basic needs of patients. Iḷisaġvik College, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and other Alaska Tribal Health Organizations have taken action to improve access and to provide safe and culturally competent care for underserved Alaska Native populations across Alaska.

Respectfully,

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