



Senate Committee on Health Care

February 4, 2020

Re: SB 1549

Chair Monnes Anderson, Vice-Chair Linthicum, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), I am writing to express our strong support for Senate Bill 1549, which will increase access to oral health care by permanently authorizing dental therapists. APANO works to unite Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders across Oregon for social change and racial justice, including health equity. Increased access to oral health care is a critical component of ending health disparities and promoting wellbeing for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Oregon.

Dental therapists are a key strategy to increase access to dental care for the Oregonians who need it most. As primary oral health professionals, dental therapists provide critical routine and preventative care under the general supervision of a dentist. This evidence-based model has been successfully implemented around the country.

Based on community input, dental care is a priority issue for APANO. Everyone should have access to health care, including oral health care. When individuals are unable to access routine dental care, dental disease can set in and result in the need for emergency care. Worryingly, some community members may even attempt to treat themselves, putting them at serious risk of a dental emergency and causing them undue pain and trauma. For children, good oral health is part of the foundation for their long-term wellbeing, academic success, and overall health.

We also hear from Asian American, Pacific Islander, and immigrant community members that they need access to culturally and linguistically appropriate care provided by health professionals that they can connect with. Dental therapists are often recruited from the communities they hope to serve and return with a commitment to providing culturally-relevant care. A provider who understands the culture and experiences can help address potential distrust and anxiety around the oral health care system and encourage patients to return to care.

The authorization of dental therapists also creates new avenues to economic prosperity for community members, particularly those who are underrepresented in health fields. Dental therapists are part of an effective workforce model that has been demonstrated across the country. They create long-term, good-paying professional jobs that can advance economic prosperity within underserved communities.



When dental therapists are authorized under general supervision, it becomes feasible to provide routine care in community settings such as schools and Head Start programs. By bringing care to places where children and adults already go or can easily get to, we have the potential to integrate dental care into the community. Lower-cost care is more accessible and can thus reduce long-term spending on acute and emergency dental care—and the serious health impacts of preventable dental disease.

We also note that this legislation recognizes tribal sovereignty, and that the dental therapist model has been particularly effective to increasing access to dental care and good paying jobs in tribal communities. As an organization working to achieve racial justice, we believe that Oregon must prioritize implementing solutions shaped and led by indigenous communities that best improve their wellbeing and include recognition of tribal sovereignty.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 1549. We believe that permanently authorizing dental therapists will increase access to care for the Oregonians who need it the most, and we respectfully urge you to vote in support of this important legislation to increase access to dental care.

Sincerely,

Jenny Lee
Advocacy Director, APANO