

March 4th, 2021

Re: Supporting HB 2528

Chair Prusak, Vice Chair Hayden, Vice Chair Salinas, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Laura McKeane and I am the Director of Oral Health Services at AllCare Health where we serve Jackson, Josephine, Curry and the Southern tip of Douglas County. I am submitting public testimony in support of HB 2528 today.

Increasing access to basic dental care not only reduces preventable cavities but also supports overall health. Lack of access to routine, preventive dental care has long been an issue for many Oregonians, especially in rural communities, communities of color, and low-income communities across our state. A situation worsened by COVID-19, which has severely restricted dental care. Evidence shows that the same Oregonians who were already impacted by significant barriers to routine and preventive oral health care are those that are most disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and its economic impacts. Dental therapy addresses unmet oral health care needs in rural and underserved communities and provides huge cost savings to the overall health system.

I strongly urge you to support HB 2528 and allow the Oregon Board of Dentistry to license dental therapists. Dental therapists are primary oral health care professionals with the training to provide the basic dental care that many Oregonians can't get today — exams, fillings, and simple extractions. Dental therapists have been safely and successfully practicing in the U.S. for more than 15 years and they are currently working in Oregon under successful but limited pilot programs.

I mentioned above that we served Curry County. Oral health services in Curry County are so difficult. Provider recruitment is very hard, and sometimes takes months. In Port Orford, there hasn't been a dentist in almost 15 years, so unfortunately, the community members are forced to travel up to Bandon or down to Gold Beach. If we had a Dental Therapist there to provide services, how awesome would that be for the people of this small community! I had the opportunity to travel to Alaska twice where Dental Therapists are trained, one year in Anchorage and one year in Bethel. After the education is complete, they go back to serve in the communities where they live and have raised families and have a history. My life was changed after these visits. Having Dental Therapists in our underserved communities addresses much of the health equity and lack of a diverse workforce model to support these rural communities.

Dental therapy not only improves access to care, but also offers a tool for future economic stability to dental clinics. By focusing on a smaller set of commonly needed procedures, dental therapists can be educated in a shorter time period and at a much lower cost than dentists. This makes dental therapists highly cost-effective to employ, and cost-effective for delivering care to communities most in need.

Most importantly, dental therapists deliver high-quality care. This has been confirmed time and time again. In August 2020, a dental therapy education program was accredited by the [American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation \(CODA\)](#), the governing body that accredits all U.S. education programs for dentists and dental hygienists. The newly accredited Alaska Dental Therapy Education Program offers a curriculum that supports our goals of creating innovative, high-quality, community-based health care right here in our own state.

Please support HB 2528 and expand dental care access in Oregon!

Laura McKeane, EFDA- Director of Oral Health Services at AllCare CCO.