



Memorandum

To: Chair Nosse, Vice-Chair Goodwin, Vice-Chair Nelson and Members of the House Committee on Behavioral Health and Health Care
From: Marty Carty, Governmental Affairs Director at the Oregon Primary Care Association
Date: February 13, 2023
Re: Support for House Bill 2979

The Oregon Primary Care Association (OPCA) is a non-profit organization, with a mission to support Oregon's 34 community health centers (CHCs), also known as federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), in leading the transformation of primary care to achieve health equity for all. [Health centers](#) deliver integrated primary, behavioral, and oral health care services to over **416,000 Oregonians**. 40% of health center patients identify as a racial or ethnic minority, 18% are uninsured, 8% are experiencing homelessness, and 3% are veterans. Community health centers provide care to some of Oregon's most vulnerable populations, including **one in six OHP members**.

On behalf of our members, we write in support of House Bill 2979 which would expand access to education for aspiring dental assistants and dental hygienists. In 2021, FQHCs in Oregon provided over [68,000 oral exams](#) in addition to approximately 41,000 visits for emergency dental services. These services cannot be provided without adequate staffing of dental assistants and hygienists. Our members regularly share that this workforce is plagued by shortages, for a variety of reasons including insufficient educational pipelines. This bill proposes multidimensional short- and long-term solutions to this workforce crisis, and we applaud the focus of funds on early touchpoints with young people interested in the profession, Tribal entities, and pre-existing community college networks.

The FQHC model of care is predicated on meeting people where they are as trusted providers of holistic, integrated care in patients' home communities. We know that lack of access to oral health care creates whole-body health problems throughout the life course, including increasing risk for [chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease](#); for children, this can look like [missing school or facing challenges eating or speaking because of tooth pain](#). These negative impacts disproportionately impact the [communities served at FQHCs](#) – those with low incomes, without insurance, in rural areas, and who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Community health centers do not turn any patient away, regardless of their income level, citizenship, or insurance status. Creating more pathways to education for dental assistants and hygienists bolsters a vital workforce who, at our health centers, provide accessible high-quality oral care to those in greatest need. We thank you for your work and urge you to support House Bill 2979.