

To: House Committee on Behavioral Health & Health Care
Measure: HB 2996 & HB 3223
Position: Support

Monday, Feb. 13th, 2023

Dear Chair Nosse, Vice-Chairs Nelson and Goodwin, and Members of the House Behavioral Health & Health Care Committee,

My name is Gary Underhill, I am a retired general practice dentist that has served patients in Eastern Oregon for over four decades. I am writing today to share my strong support of HB 2996 and HB 3223.

To share a bit about my background, I received my dental degree from Oregon Health & Science University and served in the US Army Dental Corps for two years following graduation before moving to Enterprise, Oregon. I served as President of the Eastern Oregon Dental Society, chairman of our peer review committee and chaired the Quality Assurance Committee for Advantage Dental. Formerly, I also served on the Oregon Board of Dentistry (OBD) for 8 years from 2018-2022 and was the first dentist from Eastern Oregon on the board in 23 years. I later became the President of the Oregon Board of Dentistry and served in that position from April of 2018 to April of 2019.

In the past decade, as a provider and with my time on OBD, our workforce crisis has been top of mind. One of the issues I have paid particular attention to is the decline in dental support staff, such as dental assistants and dental hygienists.

As a rural dentist, I have seen first-hand the challenges clinics face to find staff that meets current OBD requirements - often dentists have to retrain dental assistants regardless of their past education. We cannot do our work as dentists without dental assistants and dental hygienists. Although there are several dental assistant training programs across the state (mostly clustered in the metro area and along the I-5 corridor) there is nothing east of Bend. Enterprise is over 300 miles east of Bend.

Additionally, these dental programs do not always provide the hands-on education that many assistants need, again, meaning dentists often have to re-train them once they join a clinic.

Our current dental assistant certification process requires applicants to complete a third-party written exam prior to certification. This alone is inadequate, and a costly barrier to individuals seeking to join the field, particularly those in rural areas without access to testing sites or even consistent internet.

HB 2996 removes this written requirement for dental assistants applying for radiological certification and opens up an avenue for certification that is more appropriate and relevant, such as direct training and attestation by a licensed dentist.

HB 3223 would go further than HB 2996 by removing the need to complete a written exam for all types of dental assistants. For reference, Oregon recognizes five types of dental assistants: "general" dental assistants, expanded function dental assistants (EFDA), expanded function dental assistants with restorative functions certificate, expanded function orthodontic dental assistants (EFODA), and expanded function preventative dental assistants (EFPDA).

The bill also outlines some safeguards by explicitly providing an alternative pathway to the written exam - the requirement to complete a certain set of procedures before certification. For EFDA this includes polishing amalgam or composite surfaces, removing supragingival excess cement from crowns or fixed partial dentures using hand instruments, etc. In addition to these pathways already outlined in the bill, the OBD retains their rule-making authority to create different certification requirements should there be a need in the future due to medical advancement. I believe that is an important safeguard to this bill, and will prevent the legislature from directly dictating what dental assistants need to do to get certified.

While these two bills will not fix all our workforce issues, they will definitely point us in the right direction and get more dental assistants working in their full scope. I urge the committee to support and pass HB 2996 and HB 3223 this session.

Thank you,

Dr. Gary Underhill, DMD