

Improving Dental Access Will Continue

At the North Dakota Women's Network (NDWN) we are united in working to improve the lives of women. This legislative session there were many bills being introduced, but there was one in particular that was sure to improve both the physical and economic health of women and their families. Unfortunately, it did not pass this session, but we will continue the work.

HB 1256 would have allowed dentists to hire dental therapists, who are similar to physician assistants in medicine. Dental therapists are highly educated and trained professionals who can provide preventive and routine treatment for children and adults, such as fillings. In next door Minnesota, they have been working for five years helping to extend quality routine dental care to people who currently don't have access, such as the 65% of kids on Medicaid who aren't able to get dental care.

They can also help extend care to low-income pregnant women, many of whom also don't receive dental care for many reasons. Sometimes dentists are reluctant to treat them for liability concerns. In other instances, women pass up dental care because they mistakenly think oral health doesn't have long-term implications for the health of their baby. Many have trouble finding a dentist, or they don't have the means or the time to get to the dentist's office, especially if they rely on public transportation. And in some rural areas, there just are not dentists to offer service nearby.

Dental therapists are already helping Minnesota dentists expand quality care to more patients, grow their practices, and serve more low-income people. They have allowed those practices to see more patients on Medicaid, as well as working in programs that treat underserved children and the elderly in community settings such as schools or nursing homes.

But allowing dental therapists to practice would have also meant a ladder up to better income for many women who are dental hygienists in North Dakota and wish to get additional training. While almost [96% of dental hygienist students](#) are women, 71% of dentists were men in 2015. Dental therapists make between \$35 and \$45 per hour in Minnesota, including in rural areas, and in [Minnesota 90% of dental therapists](#) are female.

HB 1256 would have been a win for women and children in North Dakota who need dental care and provides an upward career path for women across the state. Organizations all over North Dakota agree and we came together to form [North Dakotans for Dental Access](#) to support this proven solution.

Although 2017 was not the year for the bill, we will keep up the fight to get this great resource for North Dakota.