



### Of Minnesota dentists

**80%**  
originally opposed  
dental therapy.

Today,  
**60%-70%**  
support it.



**Dental therapists**  
are mid-level providers,  
similar to nurse practitioners  
or physician assistants.

## Dental Therapy Can Fill Gaps in Care and Access

When it comes to dental care, too many Wisconsin residents have little reason to smile. Wisconsin has among the worst access and use rates of dental care for disadvantaged and underserved populations in the country, affecting children on Medicaid, rural residents, people with disabilities and lower-income populations.

Fortunately, there is a simple, free-market solution that would fill many of these gaps. Dental therapy is being practiced in a growing number of states, producing meaningful results in a short amount of time.

Dental therapists are mid-level providers — similar to physician assistants or nurse practitioners — who perform preventive, restorative and intermediate restorative procedures such as fluoride applications, cavity repairs and extractions of diseased teeth.

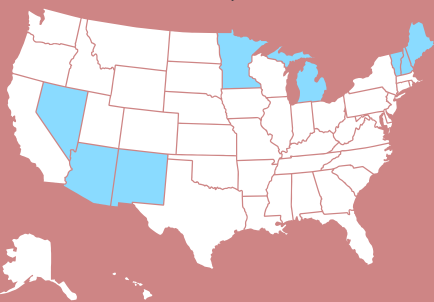
These licensed professionals work under the general supervision of dentists and often practice in locations with underserved populations.

Allowing dental therapists to practice would increase access, improve outcomes and create jobs — all at no cost to taxpayers. In fact, therapists would likely reduce state costs by preventing untreated dental problems from escalating into more serious and more expensive issues and trips to the emergency room.

How great is the need to bolster dental care in the Badger State? Consider:

- Wisconsin has the lowest rate of dental care use among all states for the more than 550,000 children who receive dental benefits through Medicaid. As of 2020, the rate stood at a mere 11.8%, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
- Roughly 64% of those children — more than 345,000 — received no dental care, according to HHS.
- About 80% of Wisconsin's 72 counties (58) suffered from too few providers per capita as of 2019, according to data from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS).
- As of 2021, more than 1.22 million residents (more than 20% of the state's population) lived in 116 oral "health professional shortage areas." Within these areas, dentists are able to meet the needs of only 36% of the population. An additional 206 dentists would be needed to eliminate these shortage areas.
- Nearly two-thirds of Wisconsin dentists, around 62%, do not accept Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) patients as of 2019.
- About 48% of Black adults and 38% of Hispanic adults in Wisconsin reported needing but not receiving dental care in 2015, compared with 18% of white adults. →

**8 states have authorized dental therapy statewide**



Minnesota, Maine, Vermont, Arizona,  
Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada  
and Connecticut

**\$27.5**  
MILLION

The cost of emergency room visits in Wisconsin for preventable oral health conditions in 2012

**41,000**  
Emergency room visits  
in Wisconsin for preventable  
oral health conditions in 2015

**11.8%**

Wisconsin has the lowest rate of dental care use among all states for the more than 550,000 children who receive dental benefits through Medicaid.



- Adults in Wisconsin earning less than \$25,000 a year had more than 2.5 times the untreated decay and a need for dental care relative to those earning more than \$25,000 a year in 2015.
- About 12.5% more adults with a disability in Wisconsin had untreated decay and a need for dental care than did adults without a disability in 2015.
- The population-to-active-dentist ratio in Wisconsin decreased by 2.52% from 2001 to 2015. Wisconsin was one of only 10 states that experienced a decrease in the ratio during this period. The decrease was the fourth largest among these states, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures.
- In Wisconsin, there were more than 41,000 emergency room visits for preventable oral health conditions in 2015, and such visits cost nearly \$27.5 million in 2012 alone.

### Minnesota's Success

In 2009, Minnesota became the first state to authorize the use of dental therapists statewide. Seven other states followed, and another five have authorized the practice on tribal lands or as pilot programs.

In 2016, Minnesota dental therapists provided care for nearly 100,000 patients. That number undoubtedly has increased since then as the number of practicing dental therapists has grown to 131 as of September 2022, according to the Minnesota Board of Dentistry.

When Minnesota first authorized dental therapy, 80% of dentists did not support it, according to Karl Self, a dentist who directs the University of Minnesota's dental therapy program. A decade later, 60% to 70% of dentists supported the change. Demand for dental therapists is so high that many students secure jobs before graduating.

Research found that practices that added dental therapists increased the number of daily patient visits, the daily gross revenue and the number of daily procedures.

### Wisconsin Legislation

Legislation authorizing licensed dental therapists to practice in Wisconsin unanimously passed the state Senate in April 2021, and a companion bill garnered broad bipartisan support in the Assembly.

The proposal would have required dental therapists to practice in a healthcare-provider shortage area or in an area made up of at least 50% underserved populations such as those on Medicaid, patients in long-term care facilities, veterans or the uninsured.



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Learn more about dental therapy and Wisconsin oral care facts at

**[badgerinstitute.org/healthcare](https://badgerinstitute.org/healthcare)**