

**TESTIMONY ON HOUSE BILL 1256**  
**House Human Services Committee**

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**January 18, 2017**

Chairman Weisz and Members of the House Human Services Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of HB 1256 – a bill relating to the practice of dental therapy in North Dakota. I have served in a leadership role for the **Northern Valley Dental Health Coalition** since 2002. Our coalition was formed with the goal of improving access to dental care for residents of the Northern Red River Valley. We were responsible for establishing Valley Community Health Centers' Dental Clinic in 2007 – a clinic that has brought dental care to thousands of residents in our region in the past 10 years. Our coalition also sponsored the American Dental Association's signature event "Give Kids a Smile" in February, and have worked with the Third Street Clinic to refer patients to donated dental care in Grand Forks.

While these activities have greatly improved access to care, there are still individuals in our community and across North Dakota not receiving the dental care that they need and deserve. Our coalition conducted a survey of our members in 2016 and the **top priorities for our members include: oral health policy and advocacy activities, expanding the dental workforce, and establishing oral health programs in long term care.** HB 1256 provides the opportunity to impact all three of these focus areas.

**Dental therapists work under the supervision of a licensed dentist and perform procedures that focus on prevention and restoration – all within a limited and defined scope of practice.** I had the opportunity to see dental therapists performing as members of the dental team at a community clinic and a school in Minnesota, and also hear testimony from dentists who employ them. Dentists in private practice have chosen to employ dental therapists as a means to expand their capacity to serve more patients and ensuring that the dentist can focus on patients needing more complex care. In Minnesota, this has increased the number of patients with public insurance who can get care in both urban and rural areas, while also increasing the profitability of the dental practice.

HB 1256 provides an opportunity to expand the dental team through **dental therapists who provide high quality, preventive care to a full range of patients.** The practice settings can include schools, public health dental clinics, community settings and long term care. The effectiveness and quality of care provided by dental therapists has been demonstrated through careful study at the University of Minnesota. Ample evidence exists that there continues to be a need for dental care in North Dakota.

My 15 year history of working to improve access to dental care, and studying the role of dental therapists has led me to believe that this legislation is a much needed tool to expand the dental workforce in North Dakota, thus improving access to care. Dental therapy is a sustainable model, saves money, and will improve the lives of North Dakota residents. **I urge you to vote yes on HB 1256.**