



# Filling the Gap

## *Addressing the dental workforce shortage in Kansas*

House Bill 2280

Senate Bill 192

Because of population shifts, many communities in Kansas are facing workforce shortage problems. Over the past few decades, rural communities in particular have been losing their grocery stores, their retail shops and their community hospitals. They're losing their local dentists, too.

### **We have a dental workforce shortage in Kansas**

Despite charity care and incentives to recruit dentists to smaller communities, the lack of access to dental care remains a challenge for most communities. In fact, 93 Kansas counties no longer have enough dentists to serve their residents. Thirteen of those counties have no dentists at all.

Our dental workforce shortage is compounded by the fact that only 25 percent of Kansas dentists accept patients insured through Medicaid. Comparatively, almost 90 percent of Kansas physicians accept Medicaid patients as part of their practices. Furthermore, the majority (63 percent) of Kansas dentists practice only in urban areas. Over time, the gap has continued to grow between the handful of urban counties that have an adequate number of dentists and the remainder of the state's counties, where the dental needs of residents are largely unmet.

The shortage of dentists in Kansas is only expected to worsen over the next decade as the dental workforce continues to age and fewer dentists opt to practice in non-urban areas.

### **The dental workforce shortage is resulting in serious health problems for Kansans**

Without access to a dentist, hundreds of thousands of Kansans go without dental services, which often leads to more serious health problems. That's because dental health isn't just about teeth. We know that untreated dental problems can result in major medical problems, including heart disease, diabetes and stroke. And dental-related problems continue to burden our community hospitals and clinics through costly emergency room visits and uncompensated care. In fact, at least 17,000 ER visits per year can be attributed to dental-related problems.

Vulnerable Kansans – such as senior citizens, people with disabilities and children – are particularly affected by the lack of access to dental care in Kansas. When it comes to children, for instance, poor dental health can lead to lifelong medical problems and greatly impact their ability to learn in school. Tooth decay is the No. 1 chronic childhood illness – five times more prevalent than asthma.

### **This is a problem we can solve in Kansas**

Unlike some of the other workforce shortage problems facing our state, the shortage of dentists is a problem we can solve – not just with a quick fix, but with a long-term solution that's proven to work. Other states have begun to address their dental workforce shortages by adding a mid-level provider to the dental team. Fifty other countries have been successful in utilizing mid-level providers to improve access to dental care. We can solve this workforce shortage in Kansas and provide more Kansans with access to dental care by creating a Kansas model for a mid-level provider known as a Registered Dental Practitioner.

### **It's a solution that's both cost-effective and proven to work**

Registered Dental Practitioners could never replace dentists but they can be a critical part of the dental team, working under the supervision of a dentist to handle routine services like fillings and non-surgical extractions. The Registered Dental Practitioner model provides dentists with the opportunity to grow their practices and see more patients, with the support of a skilled dental team behind them. And it lets dental practices provide routine care in a more cost-effective setting – much like physician assistants working alongside nurses and medical doctors.

The Registered Dental Practitioner model is a cost-effective and proven way to improve the health of Kansans. Not only does the model offer opportunities to train local people who can return to their hometowns to find work under a supervising dentist, but it also offers an opportunity to provide rural and underinsured Kansans with the quality, affordable dental services they need.

### **What is a Registered Dental Practitioner?**

Registered Dental Practitioners work under the supervision of a dentist, much like how physician assistants and nurse practitioners work with medical doctors. Registered Dental Practitioners are trained to provide evaluation and preventive services, including inspection; dental radiography; cleaning above the gum line; and basic restorative services, such as tooth preparation (drilling), tooth restoration (filling) and non-surgical extractions. Registered Dental Practitioners are not permitted to do the advanced restorative services that only dentists provide, such as root canals.