Dental Therapists: 
Increasing Access to Dental Care

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Barriers to Accessing Oral Health for Tribal Communities

• Geographic isolation
• Long distances between providers
• Limited services available
• Long waits and complicated scheduling procedures
What is a Dental Therapist?

- Midlevel oral health provider, similar to nurse practitioners and physician assistants in medicine.

- Member of the dental health care team who works with a dentist to expand high-quality dental care to more patients, grow their practices, and provide treatment to underserved, at-risk populations.

- Provides preventive and routine restorative care within their scope of practice, such as filling cavities, placing temporary crowns, and extracting badly diseased or loose teeth.
What is a Dental Therapist?

- Dental Therapists (DT) engage in oral health prevention and promotional activities including:
  - Motivational interviewing
  - Oral health education
  - Oral screening
  - Caries risk assessment
  - Referrals

- DTs engage patients in community-based, alternative practice settings
Dental Therapy: Safety and Effectiveness

• More than **40,000 people living in 81 previously unserved communities** in Alaska now have regular access to dental care.

• **No malpractice claims** have ever been filed.
Dental Therapy: Safety and Effectiveness

Results of Minnesota 2014 Early Impact Study of DTs:

• Decreased travel and wait times
• Clinics saw more new underserved and Medicaid patients
• Increased dental team productivity
• No complaints or concerns about quality or safety
• DTs working in a variety of treatment settings
Arizona’s Sunrise Review Process

• Before any new legislation authorizing the practice of dental therapists can be *introduced* in January, a full Sunrise review process must take place. (A.R.S. §§ 32-3101 through 32-3106 and 32-4401 through 32-4403).

• Specifically for health related occupations, Arizona performs Sunrise reviews for scope of practice issues as well as the regulation of previously unregulated occupations (i.e. dental therapists).

• Each year applicant groups are required to submit a Sunrise application to the legislature by September 1st outlining public benefit and safety of new regulated scope.

• The applications are then referred to the relevant Committee of Reference (COR), which is a joint committee convened specifically for the Sunrise review. The COR holds a hearing and issues recommendations to the Legislature by December 1st.
Arizona’s Sunrise Review Process

• The Sunrise process in Arizona is somewhat contentious and politicized, with occupational groups fiercely debating issues during the COR hearings.

• The Arizona Dental Association is in strong opposition to the dental therapy Sunrise application.
Dental Therapy Sunrise Application

• On September 1, 2016, the DT Sunrise application was submitted to the state requesting to establish new licensure and scope of practice for dental therapists (DT) in Arizona.
  • Arizona’s Dental Practice Act currently prevents mid-level dental providers from practicing in this state.

• The 2010 reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA) prohibits tribes and IHS facilities from employing mid-level dental providers unless State law specifically authorizes their use.
Dental Therapy Sunrise Proposal

• Broad Approach
• A Statewide Initiative
• Aligns with CODA Standards
• General Supervision under Collaborative Service Agreement
Dental Therapy Sunrise Proposal

• **Broad Approach**

  • The DT Sunrise application is drafted broadly so that we may work collaboratively and have input from coalition partners.

  • Avoids too many restrictions on DTs so that it does not unintentionally create more barriers to access for the underserved, tribes and rural areas of the state.
Dental Therapy Sunrise Proposal

- **Statewide Initiative**
  - Goes hand-in-hand with the broad approach.
  
  - Proposal includes authorization of DTs to practice statewide so that they may begin addressing the significant need for dental care in *all* dental shortage areas of our state.
  
  - Differs from the Alaska DHAT model (and WA & OR): DTs would be permitted to practice on both tribal lands and non-tribal lands.
Dental Therapy Sunrise Proposal

• **Aligns with CODA Standards**
  - In August 2015, the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) voted to adopt and implement national training standards for dental therapy education, just as they have for dental, dental hygiene and dental assisting programs.
  - CODA Accreditation reduces unnecessary educational burdens while ensuring the quality of practitioners.
  - CODA requires three academic years of DT training that includes clinical and didactic training and testing and gives advanced standing to dental hygienists.
  - Arizona currently has 10 CODA accredited schools across the state (2 dental schools and 8 dental hygiene schools).
Dental Therapy Sunrise Proposal

• **General Supervision**
  • The DT works under a collaborative agreement—similar to Affiliated Practice Hygienists—with a licensed, practicing license of a dentist through a collaborative management agreement.
  • DTs are allowed to work under the **general supervision** of a dentist. The licensed dentist does not have to be present for a DT to go out into their community to work. This is key to addressing the needs in underserved dental shortage areas.
  • Proposal requires a DT to be licensed through the State Board of Dental Examiners.
Dental Therapy Sunrise Hearing

- Inter Tribal Association of Arizona (ITAA) unanimously adopted resolution to support the DT sunrise application in November of 2016.
- Health COR held the sunrise hearing for DT on December 16, 2016 along with 7 other sunrise applications.
- The COR voted 1-8, failing to give the application a favorable review.
- Next Steps: Working with ITAA, other coalition members, public relations team and key legislative members to build on the momentum for DT in Arizona.
Recommendations for Engagement

• What’s been successful in other states?
  • Broad Coalitions of Support
  • Strong supporting data
  • Key spokespeople to carry the message
  • Strong PR & Media Campaign
  • Grassroots efforts
  • Personal stories bring it home
Coalition of Support

A broad coalition of interests and support of dental therapy legislation:

- Arizona Dental Hygienists Association
- Education Programs—Colleges/Universities
- Goldwater Institute
- Working closely with Community Health Centers
- Inter Tribal Association of Arizona and Arizona American Indian Oral Health Initiative staff
- Various rural/public oral health providers and interests

We need your input!
Thank You!

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