



Division of Legislative Services

ISSUE BRIEF

Authorized Dental Therapist

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May 22, 2025

OVERVIEW

According to the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#) 2025 Dental Care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) report, there are 7,054 designated HPSAs in the United States affecting nearly 59 million people. This estimation is reached by dividing the number of dentists available to serve the population of the area by the number of dentists that would be necessary to reduce the population to provider ratio. The US DHSS identifies a HPSA if the population-to-provider ratio meets or exceeds a 5,000 to 1 ratio. The report also estimates that the U.S. would need an additional 10,143 dentist to remove these shortages.

Only recently, Delaware reached a population of 1 million people in 2021, of which Delawareans 55 years and older make up more than [20% of the population](#), and 10.5% of Delawareans are in poverty. Additionally, Delaware's unique composition of rural and urban counties combined with a large senior population and income disparities, makes Delaware more prone to having pocket areas of inadequate access to healthcare. According to the HPSA report, Delaware has 10 HPSA areas for primary care physicians and 11 HPSAs for dentists. The report also reveals that Delaware is short 82 dental practitioners in 11 HPSAs serving a population of 319,152 people. The shortage of dental health professionals is further strained considering that [45% of Delaware dentists are 55 years of age or older](#) and 11% of Delaware dentists do not expect to be practicing in five years from 2022.

To address this issue, states have expanded and created new roles within the oral health workforce through the introduction of new oral health professional roles or by expanding existing oral health professional's scope of practice. For example, [43 states](#) have expanded the role of dental hygienists by allowing dental hygienists to initiate patient care outside of the private dental office and without the presence of a dentist (Delaware, New Jersey not included). More recently, Delaware is attempting to [further expand the scope of dental hygienists](#) by allowing them to administer local anesthesia under the direct supervision of a licensed dentist. While these efforts have great impact on reducing the shortage areas of dentists, other states have taken further steps to reduce the number of shortage areas in dental health professionals. Currently, 12 states have recognized and granted authorization for dental therapist to work statewide, and 2 states have granted authorization for dental therapist to work in Tribal settings. However, Delaware is among [36 states](#) that currently don't recognize dental therapists as oral health providers for specified dental services in approved practice sites.

Given Delaware's shortage of dental health professionals and the state's unique composition of rural and urban counties, Delaware legislators could consider authorizing dental therapist to work in the state and provide services to the more than 300,000 people in dental HPSAs.

DENTAL THERAPIST / DENTAL HYGIENISTS

While dental therapists and dental hygienists work together as part of an oral health team, they differ in the following ways:

Dental Hygienists are experts on the soft-tissue and prevention.

- Authorized to work in 42 states.
- Depending on the state, they can work independently or under dentist's supervision.

Dental Therapists focus on the hard surfaces and filling cavities.

- Authorized to work in 14 states.
- Work only under dentist's supervision.
- Specifically trained to work in dental shortage areas (safety-net, public health, Tribal and non-profit settings)

ADVANTAGES OF AUTHORIZING DENTAL THERAPISTS

- **Dental therapists help address access gaps** by reducing the 11 dental HPSAs in Delaware.
- **Alleviate workload on dentists.** According to Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, [Delaware Dentist Survey 2022](#), 45% of Delaware dentists are 55 years of age or older. Authorizing dental therapists can help alleviate the workload on dentists and provide a pathway for Delaware to recruit more dentists.
- **Reduces cost for low-income Delawareans.** Dental therapist often work in Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) which offer health services regardless of patient's ability to pay.

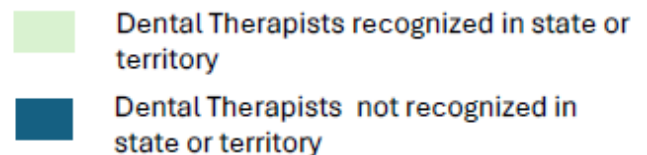
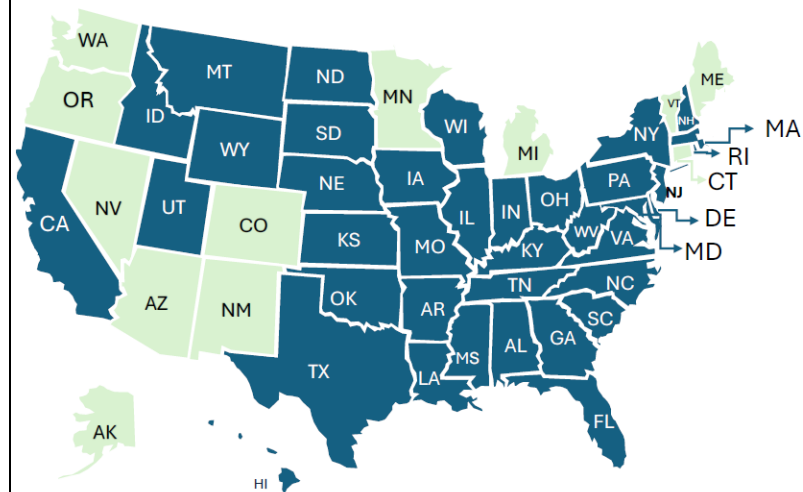
CHALLENGES OF AUTHORIZING DENTAL THERAPISTS

- **Perceived lack of qualifications.** The [American Dental Association](#) (ADA) finds that only qualified professionals, dentists, should be able to diagnose and treat dental disease.
- **Vagueness of "general supervision."** The ADA also finds that having unclear definitions of what constitutes as dental therapist working

under dentists' supervision could risk quality patient care.

- **Authorizing dental therapists is a misdirected solution.** Critics contest that lawmakers should focus on including more training for dental hygienists and increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates.

DENTAL THERAPISTS — STATE-BY-STATE AUTHORIZATION



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DELAWARE LEGISLATORS

- Delaware legislators should consider providing detailed definitions of what duties and tasks dental therapists will perform and the process for ensuring direct supervision of dentist.
- Delaware legislators should ensure that dental therapists are following accreditation standards as established under the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA).
- Delaware legislators could consider modeling dental therapist legislation after the guidelines created by the [National Model Dental Therapy Rule Panel](#).