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Efforts growing to expand access to dental care in Massachusetts through new mid-level practitioner

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Updated on September 13, 2017 at 8:49 AM Posted on September 12, 2017 at 4:48 PM

(Third-Party-Submitted)

By [Shira Schoenberg](#)

BOSTON -- Efforts are growing to pass a bill this legislative session that would create a new class of mid-level dental practitioners in Massachusetts.

The idea would be to have lower-paid practitioners who could work with a dentist to handle routine procedures, such as filling cavities. The goal would be to increase access for people who today do not have access to or cannot afford to see a dentist.

"It is high time somebody spent some time thinking about and helping the underserved people in our population," said Sen. Harriette Chandler, D-Worcester, who sponsored the bill.

Versions of the bill have been introduced in the past, but in the face of opposition from the group representing the state's dentists, those versions never made it through the legislative process.

This time, the Massachusetts Dental Society sponsored its own bill. The bill has some significant differences from a bill being pushed by Pew Charitable Trusts and [a coalition](#) of local health-related and social service organizations. But advocates for each bill have met twice so far, and they are continuing to talk about the potential for resolving their differences.

"There's been some good compromise," said Dr. David Lustbader, president of the Massachusetts Dental Society. "Certainly in this session, we'll get something done."

The Joint Committee on Public Health held a public hearing on the bills Tuesday.

John Robinson, 68, a retiree who belongs to the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, said he has gone into debt paying for a dental implant. He said there is a "gap" in dental care for seniors since Medicare does not cover dental care, and many supplemental dental plans do not cover everything. "Anything that could help people get access to affordable care to help save their teeth is very important," Robinson said.

Under the legislation, these new mid-level dental practitioners would be allowed to do things like fill cavities, extract baby teeth and damaged adult teeth, and put in temporary crowns.

Under the version sponsored by Chandler and supported by Pew, the mid-level practitioners would be able to practice in a dentist's office or off-site in places like schools or senior care centers, as long as they are under the general supervision of a dentist.

The Dental Society version would require practitioners to be under the direct supervision of a dentist, which means they would need to be in a dental office. They would also be restricted to practicing in areas that have the greatest need -- certain health centers and areas with dentist shortages.

The Dental Society bill would have stricter standards for education and training. It also includes several unrelated provisions, such as mandatory dental screenings for children entering kindergarten.

Advocates for creating the new dental practitioner position say it will ensure more people get access to dental care. "It doesn't replace dentists. It adds another member to the dental team," said Amy Rosenthal, executive director of the health care advocacy group Health Care For All.

Kerry Maguire, director of Forsyth Kids, which brings preventative dental care into Massachusetts schools, said she would hire dental therapists for her program. "It would mean we'd be able to expand our dental team and provide more intensive services earlier on because the dental therapist would be able to do simple restorations and simple fillings onsite without having to rebook the patient to a dental office," she said.

Minnesota, Maine and native communities in Alaska have already authorized mid-level dental practitioners.

Katy Leiviska, an advanced dental therapist in Minnesota, said she trained for 2,000 hours working with a dentist and is now licensed to work offsite. She treats children, immigrants, seniors and developmentally disabled patients, most of whom have state-based or no insurance. She does fillings, crowns and extractions of baby teeth and sees many emergency and new patients. "It enables the dentist to focus on a higher level of skill with more complicated cases," Leiviska said.

Gov. Charlie Baker's administration is broadly in favor of the proposal. Baker introduced language creating a new mid-level dental practitioner in his proposed MassHealth reform bill, but those reforms have not yet made it into law.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders said in a statement, "The creation of a mid-level dental therapy program will improve oral health care access while generating savings for the Commonwealth."

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