



New Mexico group urges creation of dental therapist jobs

By Lindsey Anderson / landerson@lcsun-news.com Las Cruces Sun-News

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LAS CRUCES - A health advocacy group is working to bring mid-level dental practitioners to New Mexico in hopes of alleviating a dentist shortage, especially in the state's rural regions. House Bill 17, supported by nonprofit Health Action New Mexico, would license dental therapists, who would perform common dental procedures, such as exams, X-rays and fillings, but would operate under an off-site dentist, similar to a physician assistant working under a physician. Patients would still go to dentists for more complex treatments such as oral surgeries or root canals.

"New Mexico has been on the cutting edge of using mid-level" practitioners, and the proposal follows that vein, said Barbara Webber, executive director of Health Action New Mexico.

Alaska and Minnesota have licensed dental therapists, and 18 states are considering a similar approach.

State Rep. Dennis Roch, R-67; Rep. Mimi Stewart, D-21; and Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-6, have sponsored the bill.

A similar bill in 2010 didn't make it out of the second legislative committee. Pamela Blackwell, director of Health Action New Mexico's oral health access program, thinks the group might have enough momentum to get the bill passed this time around despite opposition.

The New Mexico Dental Association opposes the bill's model because it is unique to the state, spokesman Michael Moxey said.

"It's a concept that would be tested out on New Mexicans," he said. "... What's being proposed is a cure-all, and there are deep-rooted problems in our state. One thing will not solve this issue."

Blackwell said the organization's opposition has to do with "turf issues."

"Their job is to look out for their profession," she said.

Dental challenges

Webber and Blackwell have heard of New Mexicans traveling to Mexico for affordable dental care, foregoing care so their children can receive it or turning to emergency rooms for preventable problems.



A dental therapist would help bring regular care to rural regions and cut down on waits, advocates said. They could bring preventative care to under-served communities, stopping patients from turning to costly emergency room visits and educating new parents on dental hygiene for their children, they say.

Economic benefits touted

Dental therapy students would complete a two-year education program plus a 400-hour preceptorship with a dentist after graduation, about three years total. Advocates argue the shorter school time, compared to a bachelor's degree plus four years in dentistry school for a dentist, is more cost effective.

"It is in line with the goals of health care reform to keep costs down," Webber said. Dental therapists would also create job in rural communities as they hire personnel, advocates say.

Dentists would also be freed to spend time on complex procedures instead of regular cleanings and exams.

"It just creates efficiency in the system," Webber said.

Dental care in NM

49: the state's rank in the country for the number of dentists per thousand residents.
30: counties facing dental care shortages

☒Lindsey Anderson can be reached at 575-541-5462. Follow her on Twitter @l_m_anderson.

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