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**Testimony: NM Dental Therapist Proposal
Interim Health & Human Services Committee
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My name is Don Weidemann, I am the CEO of Union County General Hospital in Clayton, NM. I have been a healthcare executive for the past 20 years, including time as the administrator of a large multi-specialty practice that had a large dental practice.

Clayton is in the northeast corner of the state. Our closest access to oral health is 40 miles away in Dalhart, TX. However, the town only has 2 dentists and it is extremely difficult to get in. The next closest option is Amarillo, TX, 120 miles away. In order for anyone in Clayton to receive dental care, they must take an entire day off work and travel from 4 to 4 ½ hours. This not only makes trips to the dentist very expensive (a whole day's wages plus travel), but when my staff go to the dentist, oftentimes I only have one or two people in the department and I have to close the department or restrict the service I can give.

I first started working in Clayton almost 3 years ago. Shortly after I arrived, I began to have pain in one of my wisdom teeth. I wanted to see a dentist right away but it took almost 4 months, as a new patient to get an appointment. Unfortunately, by the time I was able to see the dentist he said things had progressed too far and the only option he could offer was extracting my tooth. That was the first adult tooth I have lost in my life. I couldn't help but wonder what the outcome would have been if dental care was more available.

As a former practice administrator, I understand the finances behind a dental practice, and the impracticality of a dentist setting up and running a practice in a community as small as ours. When I arrived, my board prioritized the recruitment of a dentist of the things I had to do. We have an economic development corporation in town that has been working on recruiting a dentist for the past five years.

After my testimony to the Health & Government Affairs Committee two years ago, the president of the dental association caught me in the hallway as I was leaving and promised to help recruit a dentist for Clayton. He was extremely friendly and helpful. He made a trip to Clayton to meet with city and county officials and myself to find ways to help. Our local health network has purchased all of the equipment needed to start a practice to help recruit a dentist. However today, despite everyone's best efforts, Clayton is without the services of an oral health provider.

The big advantage I see and the reason why I strongly support legislation that would create a dental therapist is that it would provide an economic model that would promote more access to oral health providers. Currently, dental hygienists need to work under the direct supervision of a dentist, which restricts their care to the locations that have dentists. The dental therapist can work under the general supervision of a dentist which allows them to receive that supervision via phone, videoconferencing, etc. and allows them to practice in more remote locations. With lower overheads to set up a practice and the cost of education, they wouldn't be as restricted to high volume settings required for financial sustainability. While they would not provide all of the services of a dentist, they would provide many of the preventive and basic services that would maintain oral health and reduce the acute conditions that require a dentist.

I would strongly encourage each member of this committee to endorse dental therapist legislation.

