



MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the House Health Policy Committee

FROM: Gilda Z. Jacobs, President and CEO

DATE: October 3, 2018

SUBJECT: Expand Access to Dental Care – SB 541

On behalf of the Michigan League for Public Policy, which has been advocating for Michigan families and children with low incomes for more than 100 years, I am pleased to express our strong support of Senate Bill 541, which will expand access to vital dental care for children and families.

A study from the Pew Charitable Trusts stated, “While a state may appear to have an ample supply of oral health professionals based on per capita metrics, the location of practices for oral health providers may limit the availability of dental providers especially in rural areas and inner cities.”

The legislation before you directly targets this issue by requiring dental therapists to work in shortage areas and at federally qualified health centers, or see patients who are uninsured or who have Medicaid. This is an important requirement as access to dental care is limited or impossible to access for many Michiganders. In fact, 77 of Michigan’s 83 counties have at least one dental shortage area—these shortage areas are found in both rural and urban settings.

The League believes in a strong Medicaid program, and the addition of dental therapists to the medical profession will expand quality care to the nearly 2.5 Michiganders enrolled in Healthy Michigan or the state’s traditional Medicaid program. In 2015, only 27% of adults on Medicaid had a dental visit and in 2016, nearly half of all children covered by Medicaid or Healthy Kids Dental received no dental services. Part of the reason may be due to the lack of dentists providing services to those on Medicaid. In fact, of Michigan’s 6,641 licensed dentists, only 10% of them saw one or more adults on Medicaid. By enabling highly trained dental therapists to provide care, more Medicaid beneficiaries will be able to receive basic dental care, fillings and simple teeth extractions.

Medicaid is a highly cost-effective program and it is not always easy to identify places where additional savings can be made. One cost-saving method is to increase the use of mid-level professionals, such as physician assistants and dental therapists. The addition of this licensure will expand the number of professionals available to Michiganders in need of preventative care, instead of waiting for dental pain and problems resulting in expensive trips to the emergency room. The creation of this new mid-level professional license not only is likely to bring in an indeterminate amount of money from licensing fees, but may also result in some savings to the state Medicaid program.

We are proud to join the broad coalition of supporters who are interested in addressing significant gaps in access to oral health services and urge you to support SB 541.