

DENTAL THERAPIST PILOT

STATE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE DENTAL CARE WORKFORCE IN HEALTH CENTERS



MAXIMIZE

Leveraging State Policies and Occupational Regulation for Dental Therapist Pilot Projects



Virginia Garcia Memorial
HEALTH CENTER

ORGANIZATION

**VIRGINIA GARCIA MEMORIAL
HEALTH CENTER**

LOCATION

**HILLSBORO,
OREGON**

PATIENT

VOLUME (2022)
43,705

STATE POLICY LEVER

Pilot program for experienced restorative dental hygienists to serve as dental therapists

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Dentists who are supportive of the dental therapy role, and who can provide collaborative care and oversight
- Changes in staffing models to integrate this new role

POSITIVE OUTCOMES:

- Expansion of dental services into new community-based settings without requiring direct supervision of dentist
- Career advancement opportunities for dental staff

THE CHALLENGE

In light of the high demand for dental services, Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center (Virginia Garcia) was seeking opportunities to provide more advanced dental services to their patients while expanding the contributions of their dental staff.

STATE POLICY/STRATEGY

As of 2024, Oregon is one of 14 states that have authorized dental therapists within at least one practice setting. The Oregon Legislature passed legislation in 2011 that allowed the establishment of a dental pilot program strategy under the Oregon Health Authority to encourage innovation in oral health care delivery systems. Virginia Garcia participated in the established and approved pilot project #300 where experienced dental hygienists with a restorative endorsement were trained to become dental therapists, providing extended access to dental services in clinics and other community-based settings such as school-based clinics and mobile vans. This pilot is approved through January 2025, although many of the participants are now licensed dental therapists and no longer operating within the authority of the pilot.

The success of the dental therapy pilot projects, including pilot project #300, led to the Oregon Legislature to pass House Bill 2528 in 2021 which established the licensed role of dental therapists in the state. Dental therapists provide a scope of care that includes the most common types of dental procedures, such as exams and simple fillings, in settings such as school-based health clinics, mobile dental units, and health center primary care clinics. This statute outlines licensure to include the completion of an accredited dental therapy education program (generally master's or above) or OHA approved pilot program, and passing a clinical examination to provide dental therapy services (including specified diagnostic and restorative dental

services) under a collaborative agreement with a licensed dentist and under general or indirect supervision. There are currently no state authorized programs outside of Pilot Project #300 for experienced hygienists to be trained and practice as dental therapists.

STATE POLICY/STRATEGY IN ACTION

Under pilot project #300, two experienced Virginia Garcia dental hygienists completed a two-year dental therapy training. The training consisted of one year of academic study and clinical labs with the second year focused on direct patient care in the clinical setting. Virginia Garcia staff dentists provided intensive 1:1 training to the selected dental hygienists. Participating dentists were comfortable with this approach because they were familiar with the skills and competency level of the selected dental hygienists. Initially the training slowed the dental team's productivity due to the stringent requirements of 1:1 direct supervision. However, as training progressed and the trainees took on more autonomy, they were able to provide more patients with dental services under the general or indirect supervision of a staff dentist. Since this training, productivity for the dental program has increased. Dental Therapists are now seeing a similar volume of patients as dentists. As part of the State's statutory requirements for dental therapists, a collaborative agreement is required with at least one supervising dentist. Most of a dental therapist's scope can be performed under general supervision, however the collaborating dentist must be onsite when a dental therapist is providing extended dental care services (such as placement of temporary restorations, tooth stabilization, and select simple extractions), and must review procedures performed by the dental therapist.

Due to a shortage of dental hygienists at Virginia Garcia, it has been a challenge to leverage the dual degree dental therapist role to its maximum capacity. Currently the dental hygienists/dental therapists staff provide 2 clinic days per week of dental therapy services, and the remainder of clinic hours in dental hygiene.

Virginia Garcia is moving toward a model for

dental therapists working in community-based settings, which will extend the services provided under general supervision by a dentist. To best allocate staff resources, the health center staffs more entry-level dental assistants rather than expanded function dental assistants to assist the dental therapists/hygienists. This is due to the more limited scope of dental therapy that does not require expanded functions.

THE IMPACT

The role of dental therapy enables opportunities for career development and the gainful employment of dental hygienists seeking career advancement.

Although Virginia Garcia is still working to integrate the dental therapist role within the health center, they see promise with the extension of dental services in new settings. During the pilot phase, patients completed a survey after each procedure by a dental therapist in training to ensure patient satisfaction. In addition, before advancing to the next stage of training, several treatment plans completed by the trainee were evaluated via a blind review (the reviewer did not know if the cases were done by a dentist or dental therapist) to confirm quality of care. A formal evaluation of patient safety was completed by the Oregon Health Authority and found no adverse events or deficiencies with the implementation of a dental therapy model.

“The dental therapist role has allowed Virginia Garcia to expand the care we provide in the community. Because they [the dental therapists] are able to provide exams and simple fillings, we can be in places that were typically difficult for dental care, like school-based health centers and mobile clinic environments. This new role will create more opportunity to reach communities that otherwise would not receive the care they deserve.”

GIL MUÑOZ, CEO, VIRGINIA GARCIA MEMORIAL HEALTH CENTER