

DENTAL ASSISTANT ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

STATE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE DENTAL CARE WORKFORCE IN HEALTH CENTERS



TRAIN

Leveraging State Regulatory Policies to Train Dental Assistants in Health Centers



ORGANIZATION

PENOBSCOT COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER, INC.

LOCATION

BANGOR, MAINE

PATIENT

VOLUME (2022)
57,651

STATE POLICY LEVER

State regulation that permits: (1) on-the-job training of DAs; (2) delegation of basic dental assisting services to DAs (unlicensed personnel)

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Experienced and committed dental staff support the design and implementation of training

POSITIVE OUTCOMES:

- Grow-your-own approach allows tailored training to meet health center and dentist preferences

¹ There is a state license to provide dental radiography services. However, the general practice of dental assisting does not require a state license.

THE CHALLENGE

Penobscot Community Health Center (PCHC) experienced a double challenge in staffing its dental practice: 1) the health center continuously experienced a shortage of dental assistants (DAs), and 2) there were limited local training opportunities to support dental assisting workforce development.

STATE POLICY/STRATEGY

Maine has statutory provisions enabling DAs to receive on-the-job training in health centers. In Maine, the practice of dental assisting does not require a state license.¹ According to state statute, dentists are able to delegate certain services to unlicensed individuals including those operating under the title of “dental assistant”. Under this state policy, Maine health centers may oversee on-the-job training for DAs as part of the preparation to provide dental assisting services for patients.

To address an ongoing shortage of DAs and lack of training opportunities, Penobscot has developed its own DA training and hiring program. Federal pass-through funding from the Maine Workforce Innovation Network covers the DA training program fees. This enables Penobscot and ten other Maine health centers to offer DA training free of charge to prospective DAs.

STATE POLICY/STRATEGY IN ACTION

The DA on-the-job training program (DA training) developed by PCHC is administered to DA students over the course of 6 to 8-weeks. PCHC hires DA students as health center employees. The DA students have access to benefits upon hire and throughout their DA training. DA students also receive a sign-on bonus. Fifty percent (50%) of this bonus is provided immediately upon hire. The remaining 50% is provided after 6 months of employment at the health center.

DA training cohorts include 1 to 4 students. Students receive didactic (classroom style) training in the morning and clinical mentorship in the afternoon. After DA training, students receive program completion certificates and are celebrated among their team. To engage DAs in their career growth they receive pay increases when they receive their Maine Dental Radiology license, Certified Dental Assistant Certificate, and their Expanded Functions Dental Assistant License. Advancements come with additional wage increases. (State funding through the Healthcare Training for ME program is also available to support CDA training and certifications offered at the local college.)

PCHC staff commitment to DA training has been key to its success.

- Internal expertise to develop training is leveraged: The DA training program was developed under the guidance of the Dental Practice Director, who has years of experience working as a DA and in academia with other DA training programs and the full-time DA Trainer who also has years of experience working as a DA.
- A full-time DA trainer also oversees implementation: PCHC promoted an experienced staff DA to serve as the trainer and supervisor for DA students and new DAs in a full-time capacity. This position is supported as part of the health center's overall budget, but some grants have occasionally been leveraged to offset costs.
- Incentives for clinical preceptors are provided: Other dental team members serve as clinical preceptors and provide clinical oversight to DA students. They receive a bonus stipend per half-day of clinical oversight. Funding for preceptor stipends is part of the organization's budget.

THE IMPACT

Penobscot has realized great benefits from the DA training program. Prior to this program, the health center experienced persistent open positions and understaffing. Today, DA trainee positions are filled within five days of opening. The training program is also a successful recruitment strategy for the health center. Of the 14 DA trainees in the 2022 and 2023 cohorts, four have been retained as of 2024. They currently receive more applicants than they have open positions, which allows them additional discretion for strategic recruitment.

Although dental staff were initially hesitant to hire inexperienced DA students and host training, they have since seen the benefits from this grow-your-own approach. Working directly with DAs from students-to-graduates allows health center staff to tailor the program to meet the health center's needs.

“This program not only supports the staffing needs for the dental center, but it gives members of the community an opportunity to learn a new skill set that they will forever have. We continuously hear during interviews for this position that the candidate always had an interest in dental but for many unable to attend college because of financial reasons. In this program, individuals are paid as a full-time employee of PCHC while learning the trade of a dental assistant.”

DANICA LORING, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS