

Dental Therapy 101

Washingtonians do not have enough oral health care providers where they live. Dental Therapy is a proven solution to meet demand and increase access to dental care in Washington.



What are dental therapists?

Dental therapists serve as primary dental care providers who deliver routine and preventive care under the supervision of a dentist. They have a significantly smaller scope of practice than dentists, but are trained to the same standards as dentists. Dental therapists receive clinical education for 80 procedures in 3 academic years, while dentists receive clinical education for 500 procedures in 4 academic years.

Are dental therapists accredited?

Dental therapists are accredited by The Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), the same body that accredits dental schools and sets the standards for dental therapy training programs to ensure standardized, quality care. Skagit Valley College offers a rigorous three year Dental Therapy Program focused on student centered teaching and learning.

What do dental therapists provide?

Along with preventive dental care, dental therapists provide accessible, quality care to meet the needs of underserved communities. Dental therapy reduces the need for extractions, allowing patients to keep full, healthy smiles.

Dental therapists are an expansion of the dental care team.

Often compared to a physician assistant, dental therapists add another member to the dental care team, enabling each team member to provide services at the top of their scope. Dental therapists are trained on a set of commonly needed services, such as cleanings and fillings, freeing up dentists to focus on more complex dental procedures. This reduces wait times for appointments and increases access to routine care.

Dental therapists are vital to communities.

More than 2 million Washington residents have a dental care provider shortage where they live. Communities of color, low-income families, and residents of rural communities are most restricted in access to care. Dental therapists improve health care outcomes by expanding preventive and routine care where it is currently out of reach. Dental therapists are already successfully practicing on Tribal lands in Washington state, and in at least 9 other U.S. states.



Dental therapy creates career pathways for underserved communities.

Dental therapy creates jobs and employment opportunities for students to stay and serve the communities where they live. Dental therapists who serve the community they grew up in are more trusted by their patients, leading to better oral health outcomes. The cost of education and certification for dental therapists is significantly less than what is required to be a dentist, creating an affordable pathway to quality employment in the healthcare field for those of us from low-income households.

Dental therapy is a cost-effective approach to accessible dental care.

Dental related issues are a common reason uninsured people seek care from Washington’s emergency departments. Dental therapists provide routine care to prevent severe dental issues.

Regular dental care is out of reach for too many working families who can’t find an affordable dentist where they live. Dental therapy adds providers to fill the gap.

Washington's Dental Workforce Scope of Work & Education Standards

Dental therapists have clinical education for 80 procedures in 3 academic years, while dentists have clinical education for 500 procedures in 4 academic years.

Dental Assistant	Expanded Dental Function Auxiliary	Dental Hygienist	Dental Therapist	General Dentist
0 years	1 year	2 years CODA Standard	3 years CODA Standard (+ prerequisites)	4 years CODA Standard (+ prerequisites)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited preventive procedures Assist provider in placement of fillings Nitrous oxide sedation as directed by dentist Sterilization procedures Take X-rays Make temporary crowns Assist in dental procedures, removal of cement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited preventive procedures Placement of fillings Nitrous oxide sedation as directed by dentist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All preventive procedures Placement of fillings Local anesthesia & nitrous oxide sedation Oral assessment Treatment of periodontal disease 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All preventive procedures Placement of fillings & removal of decay Local anesthesia & nitrous oxide sedation Oral evaluation, assessment, & treatment planning Treatment of periodontal disease Limited surgical procedures including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited extractions (non-surgical, mobile teeth) Dispensing and administering drugs prescribed by dentists (non-opioids) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All preventive procedures Placement of fillings & removal of decay Local anesthesia & nitrous oxide sedation Oral evaluation, assessment, diagnosis, & treatment planning Treatment of periodontal disease Surgical procedures including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Root canals on <u>all</u> teeth <u>All</u> extractions <u>Full</u> prescribing authority Extensive restorative procedures including crown, bridge, implant placement, dentures, periodontal surgery, bone grafts, TMJ treatment, orthodontics, cosmetics