

February 10, 2017

Chairman Dan Hawkins  
Health and Human Services Committee

Chairman Hawkins and Members of the Committee,

As Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners of Johnson County, I am writing in support of House Bill (HB) 2139, which would establish a Dental Therapist category of dental health professional, a mid-level provider working under the supervision of a dentist. Passage of this bill would address the overall dental workforce shortage and would increase access to oral health services. This expanded access would be accomplished without additional cost to the State of Kansas.

Under the provisions of HB 2139, a Dental Therapist would work under the supervision of a dentist who either practices in a safety net clinic or is a Medicaid provider. In Johnson County, access to dental care is primarily linked to the lack of dental insurance and inability to afford dental services. Access to care, including dental care, has been part of Johnson County's Community Health Improvement Plan since the 1990's. There are few low-cost resources for low-income Johnson County residents who lack dental insurance.

Poor dental health was reported by 7.6% of Johnson County residents, who stated that they had six or more permanent teeth removed due to decay, gum disease or infection. Poor dental health leads to medical issues such as heart disease, diabetes, or stroke. Senior citizens, people with disabilities and children are more significantly affected than the rest of the population.

Research shows a strong correlation between periodontal disease and mental health problems, including stress, depression and anxiety. All of these conditions can have an impact on the progression of periodontal disease. Having poor oral health can negatively impact a person's self-esteem, often resulting in loss of confidence in their appearance, which can lead to depression. Many uninsured persons with mental illness are not able to prioritize their dental health care needs, and they may forego treatment altogether, leading to new oral health problems and exacerbating both their mental illness and other physical health issues.

Expansion of the dental workforce through Dental Therapists in the prescribed settings for practice would alleviate many of the issues related to accessibility and affordability as safety net clinics provide a more affordable option for provision of dental care. For all of these reasons, Johnson County supports HB 2139 and requests careful consideration of the significant opportunity to increase access to oral health services across the state.

Thank you for this opportunity to express our perspective on this important policy decision.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
JOHNSON COUNTY, KANSAS



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Ed Eilert, Chairman