



**House Bill 2139 – Support**  
House Health and Human Services Committee  
Phillip Davis, CEO  
Feb. 14, 2017

Chairman Hawkins and members of the committee:

On behalf of Flint Hills Community Health Center, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 2139.

Flint Hills Community Health Center is one of 44 safety net clinics in Kansas, and we have locations in Emporia and Eureka, employing more than 100 Kansans with an average salary of \$51,200.28, and providing healthcare services for nearly 10,000 residents.

Safety net clinics provide healthcare services regardless of patients' ability to pay with a unique approach to transform care, improve health, and generate significant economic returns.

Our clinic's mission is to promote the health and well-being of the communities we serve in Chase, Greenwood, Lyon, Osage and Woodson counties. We do this by offering comprehensive medical, dental and psychiatric services on a sliding-fee scale based on family size and income. We also have lab services, immunizations, prescription assistance, and "enabling services" to remove barriers to care, like interpreter services and free transportation.

While we do what we can to remove these barriers to care for patients, there is still work to do to help Kansans get the oral health services they need. HB 2139 is a solution that would help us accomplish that by allowing Dental Therapists to become licensed and work to help address the shortage of dentists in the state.

In Kansas, 83 percent of counties do not have enough dentists to serve their population. Establishing a Dental Therapist will help address this need at no cost to the state. Our service area population of more than 60,000 residents should have about 24 dentists to meet residents' needs but instead has only about 17. Our service area includes one of the 14 counties that has no dentists at all.

Many residents from outside our service area travel to utilize our services. In underserved rural regions like ours, residents must take off more time from work and pay more to travel than they would if there were more dental providers. For patients who don't have paid time off, the cost is even greater to get dental care. For children, they miss even more school time.

When residents can't get access to care, they often go decades without receiving any oral healthcare. What that means is that when they finally do get care, they often need cost-prohibitive services and complicated dental surgery. Many must have several teeth removed and then go even longer until they can afford dentures, all while doing even more irreversible damage to the remaining teeth.

Those who do not get timely care often end up in the local hospital's emergency room with tooth pain and a high hospital bill – a bill that often goes unpaid, causing problems for our already struggling

hospitals. Our health center follows up with uninsured patients who visit the ER to try and schedule them with us for care, but we would prefer to be able to help patients before they end up in the ER.

It is well documented that poor oral health contributes to poor overall health. Research shows that people with serious gum disease were 40 percent more likely to have another chronic health condition, like heart disease or diabetes. When you make a move to allow Dental Therapists to practice in Kansas, you are really promoting Kansans' overall health and making it a priority to help Kansans be healthy and happy.

Especially after recent cuts to Medicaid reimbursements in Kansas, there are even fewer dentists accepting KanCare patients than ever before. As a result, 52 percent of the dental patients at our health center are KanCare members. With more dental providers – like a Dental Therapist – we could see more KanCare members, as well as patients with other or no insurance.

Allowing Dental Therapists to work in Kansas would not only help improve the health and the lives of our residents, it would also have a positive economic impact on our community. By hiring more Dental Therapists, we would also hire more dental assistants and other support staff. In 2011, 19 Dental Therapists in Alaska created 76 new jobs and generated \$9 million in economic activity.

Because there are no dental schools in Kansas and limited spaces for Kansas residents in dental schools in neighboring states, it is very difficult to recruit dentists to Kansas. Even with five dentists on our staff, we do not have enough dentists to meet the need of our service area residents. Our health center has advertised an opening on our staff for a dentist for more than one year, and we have been unable to fill the position because of the dentist shortage in Kansas.

A Dental Therapist could see between 2,000 and 3,000 patients each year. Allowing Dental Therapists to practice in Kansas would make way for a university program to educate them, expanding educational opportunities for Kansans and creating even more jobs in the education sector. This step would even attract new health professionals and their families to the state.

Dental Therapists have been proven to provide safe and effective care with no adverse events as mid-level dental providers. We support these providers first being a Registered Dental Hygienist, then receiving dental therapy education from a school accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation, before having proper supervision by a licensed dentist.

Dental Therapists would go a long way to helping Kansans have proper access to oral health services. Thank you for your consideration of my comments in support of HB 2139.