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May 16, 2025

Alaska House Labor & Commerce Committee
Re: House Bill 197

Representative Fields, Representative Hall and members of the committee

My name is Gail Walden. I have been a licensed dental hygienist in Alaska since 2003. Over those 22 years, I have worked as a clinical dental hygienist, been a member and involved with the state dental hygiene association, served eight years on the Alaska Board of Dental Examiners (2013-2021) and been an examiner for organizations that test clinical skills of graduating dental hygienists across the United States.

First, I would like to express my frustration at trying to gather information about this bill from the Board of Dental Examiners. Meeting minutes from December 13, 2024 and February 7, 2025 that discuss this very legislation are not available. Also, their last meeting on April 28th was cancelled, and their next meeting date is unknown. This lack of information from the board is unacceptable and is, no doubt, one of the reasons HB 197 seeks to establish an executive administrator. While I do not disagree with the board's intent to establish an executive administrator, I do disagree and oppose the board attempting to remove language from Sec 08.32.014 that pertains to dental hygienists.

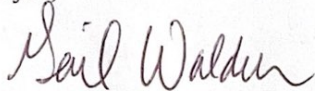
To give the committee some history, the dental hygiene statute as currently written, went into effect when it was signed by Governor Parnell in May of 2012. Prior to that, the statute read "at least a two-year course." I was on the committee in 2011 along with other hygienists and dentists that reviewed **all** the dental statutes; during that process, there was some debate, but ultimately, the wording was changed from "at least a two-year course" to "at least two years duration." The intent of the change was to align with the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) standard that currently states and has stated for a **very** long time that dental hygiene "curriculum must include at least **two academic years** of full-time instruction or its equivalent." The board is misleading legislators and its current board members are obviously not familiar with the history of this language. To be clear, no dental hygiene applications have been denied based on this statute. The statute is not "outdated," it is accurate. Two years duration refers to academic years and includes those accelerated programs where dental hygiene students graduate with an associates degree.

Whereas the board proposes to remove the language, I along with other hygienists in Alaska, want it strengthened or left alone. The CODA standards are clearly written and the statute must reinforce that language. As you know well, statutes are not easily changed and require debate and engagement with legislators. While this can make the process slow and challenging, it also serves as a safeguard. The fact

is, hygienists are a minority at the table. There are 9 members on the Board of Dental Examiners, 2 are dental hygienists. The Commission on Dental Accreditation has 33 representatives, 1 of them is a dental hygienist. Keeping our educational requirements in statute not only safeguards our professional standards, but provides the public with assurances that competent dental hygienists are being licensed in Alaska. The board of dental examiners exists to protect the public; to ensure all dental providers meet certain standards. Why would they want to remove language that supports their mission and is accurate? I find that concerning, and you should as well.

In conclusion, I ask that you consider the facts that I have presented today and request your support to keep "at least two years duration" in statute or strengthen it as proposed by the Alaska Dental Hygienists' Association.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gail Walden". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the "Thank you," text.

Gail Walden, RDH, BSDH