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Questions & Answers

HB 127: Dental Hygienist Advanced Practice Permit

House Finance Hearing - March 2, 2020

What are the education and training requirements for dental hygienists?

Dental hygienists in Alaska must have graduated from an academic dental hygiene program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) of the American Dental Association. The Alaska Board of Dental Examiners requires a minimum of an associate degree, but most hygienists now graduate from four year bachelor's degree programs and some from master's degree programs. A dental hygienist must also have passed the written National Dental Examination, as well as the Western Regional Examining Board or a state or regional dental hygiene clinical examination approved by the Board. Additionally, a dental hygienist who applies for an advanced practice permit under HB 127 would have to have a minimum of 4,000 hours of documented clinical experience under the supervision of a licensed dentist.

Will advanced practice permit-holders be able to bill Medicaid? Will this increase Medicaid costs?

Dental hygienists already bill Medicaid for their services, and HB 127 does not create any new services that are not already being provided to patients. The fiscal analysis from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services says, "Possible increased costs are indeterminate to Medicaid benefits as new service types will be coming online and may not replace existing services one-to-one which are currently provided through the dental group."

What qualifies as an "underserved community" in Alaska?

HB 127 allows advanced practice permit-holders to serve patients who are residents of a dental health professional shortage area designated under 42 U.S.C. 254e (page 3, line 9). 42. U.S.C. 254e defines a health professional shortage area as:

- “(A) an area in an urban or rural area (which need not conform to the geographic boundaries of a political subdivision and which is a rational area for the delivery of health services) which the Secretary determines has a health manpower shortage and which is not reasonably accessible to an adequately served area,
- (B) a population group which the Secretary determines has such a shortage, or
- (C) a public or nonprofit private medical facility or other public facility which the Secretary determines has such a shortage.

All Federally qualified health centers and rural health clinics, as defined in section 1861(aa) of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 1395x(aa)), that meet the requirements of section 254g of this title shall be automatically designated as having such a shortage.”

According to the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration, a health provider shortage area (HPSA) is scored from 0-26. The primary factor used to determine an HPSA is the number of health professionals relative to the population with consideration of high need. Federal regulations stipulate that, in order to be considered as having a shortage of dental providers, an area must have a population-to-provider ratio of at least 5,000 to 1 (4,000 to 1 if there are unusually high needs in the community). The following components are used to calculate a dental HPSA score:

- 1) population-to-provider ratio (10 points max),
- 2) percent of population below 100% federal poverty line (10 points max),
- 3) water fluoridation status (1 point max), and
- 4) travel time to nearest source of care (NSC) (5 points max).

See attached document for full list of designated dental health shortage areas in Alaska.

Will advanced practice permit-holders work independently fulltime?

According to Katrina Virgin, President of the Alaska Dental Hygienists’ Association, most advanced practice permit-holders in other states primarily work part-time in dental shortage areas or specific alternative practice settings (nursing homes, schools, Federally Qualified Health Centers, etc.) as well as continuing to work part-time in traditional private or public health dental offices.

Is there a dental hygienist program in Alaska?

Yes. The University of Alaska Anchorage has an accredited dental hygiene program. The UAA School of Allied Health has offered a degree in Dental Hygiene for almost 50 years. They have graduated more than 500 dental hygienists. They recently transitioned their program from an associate level degree into a 120 credit baccalaureate degree to accommodate the expanding scope of practice in dental hygiene.

The UAA Dental Hygiene Program has submitted a letter of support for HB 127.