

December 2, 2009

The Honorable Byron Dorgan  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The undersigned organizations write to express our strong support for a provision in the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA) that requires that the dental health aide therapist (DHAT) position in the Community Health Aide Program (CHAP) be limited to Alaska.

While enactment of IHCIA legislation is long overdue because it contains so many important provisions to improve the health of American Indians and Alaska Natives, we continue to have concerns about three specific surgical procedures that DHATs perform in Alaska without the comprehensive education and training that dentists receive.

We note the concern that this committee has had in the past regarding the shortage of dentists in the Indian Health Service (IHS), but believe that the problem is being addressed. This year alone there will be 70 additional dentists providing care in tribal areas. With one more year of similar recruiting success, the shortage of dentists in the IHS could be eliminated. No other action would have a more significant impact upon increasing access to surgical oral healthcare in tribal areas with profound need.

Many other successful programs are in place. Some of our organizations have been working with the IHS to create and fund a dental summer extern program and lobbying to increase student loan repayments for dentists hired by the Service or tribes. Last year, 150 dental students participated in the IHS's extern program. This program will lead to more young dentists choosing to work in tribal areas, reducing even further the need to look for other models to provide surgical dental care.

Other workforce models do exist. One approach that merits consideration is the expanded function dental assistant model that has been used with great success by the U.S. military. The American Dental Association is currently funding and pilot testing one such model, the Community Dental Health Coordinator (CDHC). CDHCs are trained to provide community-focused oral health promotion, prevention, and coordination of dental care. This program will be independently evaluated during the pilot phase before being replicated in other areas.

For these reasons, as well as many others, we are opposed to Congress expanding the Alaska therapist model. We hope you will strongly consider our perspective.

Sincerely,

**American Academy of Oral & Maxillofacial Pathology**  
**American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry**  
**American Academy of Periodontology**  
**American Association of Orthodontists**  
**American College of Prosthodontists**  
**American Dental Association**

cc: Members, U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs