

2022 Michigan Dental Therapy Report Summary

MPCA and its Relationship to Dental Therapy

Michigan Primary Care Association (MPCA) is the voice of 40 community health centers and four Native American health service providers that provide healthcare to 1 in 14 people across Michigan. Community health centers are community-based and patient-directed organizations that deliver comprehensive primary care and other integrated healthcare services, including oral healthcare. MPCA's mission is to support health center excellence in the delivery of equitable care. We see dental therapy as an opportunity to improve access within the communities health centers serve and advance health equity in Michigan.

Michigan's dental therapy legislation was passed in December 2018 and its administrative rules were promulgated in April 2021. Now, our state has a pathway to dental therapy licensure and a Medicaid policy for reimbursement. MPCA's commitment to supporting dental therapy has spanned from its earliest legislative advocacy through its current implementation initiatives. One of these initiatives was a collaboration in 2022 with Wingspan Research Group, LLS, to develop and implement a set of surveys to gauge the perceptions around oral health access and dental therapy in Michigan, the interest levels in hiring or becoming a dental therapist, and perceived opportunities and barriers regarding dental therapy.

Who we surveyed

Survey questions were tailored to gain insights from each of the following four groups. The full summary reports are linked below.

1. [Dental Employers in Michigan Report](#) (dentists)
2. [Michigan Allied Dental Professionals Report](#) (dental hygienists and assistants)
3. [Dental Students in Michigan Report](#)
4. [Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting Students in Michigan Report](#)

Details about survey distribution can be found in the Methods sections of each report. Responses were highest among Allied Dental Professionals (491), Dental Employers (173), Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting Students (93), and lowest among Dental Students (51).

Trends and Insights

The responses from Allied Dental Professionals and Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting Students shared many similarities. For example, when asked about their interest in pursuing a career in dental therapy, 25% of both groups expressed a lot of interest and over 33% of both groups expressed some interest. Combined, this represents 349 individuals with an interest in pursuing careers in dental therapy, with over 80% of both groups reporting that they would pursue education within the next 3 years. Trends were also similar regarding barriers to pursuing dental therapy education and the degree level respondents considered to be acceptable. A bachelor's degree was considered most acceptable, then an associate degree, then a master's degree for both groups. Online classes were identified as the top factor that would make dental therapy education feasible for over 80% of both groups.

The responses of Dental Employers and Dental Students also shared many trends, which were often in stark contrast with the two groups discussed above. Regarding interest in employing dental therapists, 64% of dental employers indicated no interest at all, and 58% of dental students expressed that they would not employ dental therapists after graduation. Less than 2/3 of both groups expressed a good understanding of the role of dental therapists in the dental practice, and less than 1/3 of both groups would be comfortable entering a supervisory role with dental therapists or with dental therapists performing procedures for which they are trained and authorized. The expressed knowledge gap regarding the role of dental therapists (dental employers 13%, dental students 23%) highlights the critical need for more education, as dental therapy is on the verge of full implementation in Michigan.

All four groups expressed that their top sources for information about dental therapy included professional associations, peer-reviewed journals, and other oral health professionals (dentist and allied dental professionals) or instructors (students).

Leveraging What We Have Learned

Among the dental employers who responded to the survey, 50 expressed some (34) or a lot (16) of interest in employing dental therapists, and 15% of dental students intend to employ dental therapists after graduation. Although this is a relatively low proportion, it is positive feedback considering the typical adoption curve for emerging professions. With this number of early adopters, the profession's value can quickly be demonstrated in Michigan.

The comments shared in all four reports provide valuable insights to shape dental community outreach and education as well as dental therapy implementation.

Among Dental Employers and Dental Students, comments highlighted concerns about the adequacy and cost of dental therapy education and the ability of dental therapists to improve access as intended. There was also concern about the diversion of patients or positions away from dentists. A full understanding of Michigan's dental therapy educational requirements, scope, and supervision can help alleviate these concerns, as can the ample research from dental therapy states supporting the model as a cost-effective approach to improving access.

Although the comments of Allied Dental Professionals and Dental Hygiene and Assisting Students were generally positive, these groups highlighted concerns about anticipated under-compensation of dental therapists, a perceived threat to dental hygiene job security, and misconceptions about dental therapy education and scope. These concerns can also be addressed with readily available resources and experiences of other dental therapy states.

Conclusion

The data collected in these reports is valuable in many ways. Educators, administrators, professional associations, potential employers, aspiring dental therapists, and a variety of other stakeholders may use this information to innovate and make decisions. Those involved with dental therapy promotion and implementation may use it to target relevant outreach and education to their intended audiences. Readers may gain a better understanding of the dental therapy profession and where it stands in our state. MPCA appreciates all who shared perspectives and insights through these surveys and remains committed to supporting care delivery models aimed at expanding access and advancing health equity.