

Oral Testimony – September 12, 2017
Massachusetts Legislature Joint Committee on Public Health
Dr. Todd Belfbecker, General Dentist
In support of H.B.2820/S.B. 142, “An Act Relative to Graduate Education for Certain Professionals” (2017)

Good afternoon members of the Joint Committee on Public Health. My name is Dr. Todd Belfbecker. I'd like to thank Representative Hogan, Senator Lewis and all of the distinguished committee members. It is an honor to appear before you today in support of House Bill 2820 and Senate Bill 142.

I have practiced general dentistry in Revere and Boston for 12 years. I am proud to say I have accepted MassHealth patients for approximately 10 of those years.

I'm here to support this legislation because I believe in oral health care for all, including underserved populations such as low-income residents and the elderly.

As a MassHealth provider, I know the first step is getting patients who are in financial difficulty in the door before a problem arises. It is important to stress that prevention is always the key. By providing preventive and restorative treatment to patients with MassHealth, oral health care providers are helping to solve that problem.

I'd like to share with you one story about a dedicated MassHealth patient. This 18-year-old came to my office on the day of his high school graduation. He made the appointment because he was in severe pain due to an infected tooth. His important day could have been ruined.

The quickest solution would have been to extract his infected tooth but he was only 18, and I wanted him to keep his tooth for the rest of his life. Because of my knowledge of endodontics, I knew that a root canal and then a crown would save this tooth while resolving the infection and pain. Those procedures succeeded. He now is a dedicated patient, committed to preventative care so he does not have to experience anything like that again.

In this scenario, if I didn't have training in performing root canals, I may not have known that the tooth could be saved or may not have even considered saving the tooth to be an option. This is my fear when it comes to providers with less education performing irreversible procedures without any supervision. Once that tooth comes out, you simply cannot put it back in.

The human body is complex, and not everything goes as expected. That is why H.B. 2820/S.B. 142 makes sense – more supervision from licensed dentists is essential so that no patient will suffer because a provider has had too little experience or training in how to handle complex cases or how to handle potential complications.

We need to do more when it comes to caring for underserved populations.



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Enacting this legislation will go a long way toward creating an integrated system where mid-level dental practitioners work in partnership with licensed dentists as part of a comprehensive approach to care that includes oral health education, preventive care and more.

But access to fully-trained and accredited dentists or newly licensed mid-level practitioners cannot succeed in the long run unless we address the larger issue of MassHealth funding.

Until we have additional MassHealth coverage for oral health care, the dental community will continue its uphill battle when it comes to saving more teeth and convincing more dentists to accept MassHealth patients. The fact is, I was only able to save that high school student's tooth because Mass Health covers so many procedures for children and young adults. When it comes to adult coverage, we in our office consider it to be charity work, or our moral obligation to our community, since reimbursements are so low that we essentially lose money with each procedure. To increase access to care, and to entice more dentists to accept MassHealth, more procedures need to be covered and greater reimbursements from the state need to accompany those procedures.

Thank you.