

Oral health practitioners would help rural residents

By: **Sen. Ann Lynch**, For the News Tribune

In order to help address the growing crisis of access to dental care, I am proud to carry a bill that will create a new professional to provide care to the underserved. This oral health practitioner, or OHP, would be similar to nurse practitioner and be able to serve thousands across Minnesota.

They would be especially focused on vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, low-income and special-needs populations, who cannot access the dental care they so desperately need.

Patients in rural areas often wait many months to see a dentist, even for serious dental conditions.

Hospital emergency rooms are seeing thousands of repeat patients with unresolved dental problems. According to 2006 data, there were well over 20,000 visits to Minnesota emergency rooms for the purpose of addressing dental health problems. The cost to Minnesota taxpayers and Minnesota hospitals is unacceptable. This problem will only get worse over the next 15 to 20 years, when 60 percent of practicing dentists in Minnesota are projected to retire.

We cannot afford to wait.

The legislation I introduced is based on the recommendations of a work group made up of dentists, hygienists, the University of Minnesota, MnSCU (the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system), and the Minnesota Department of Health. The bill addresses the education, licensure and scope of practice for this new practitioner.

The OHP would work under the supervision of a practicing and licensed Minnesota dentist through a collaborative practice agreement. These arrangements would be completely voluntary, and no dentist would be required to use an OHP if they were not comfortable doing so.

Based on the collaborative agreement, an OHP could provide diagnostic, preventive, therapeutic and restorative services for patients. Currently, dental hygienists are not allowed to provide restorative services for patients, and yet 80 percent of the oral health needs of populations being served through community clinics need this kind of service.

Programs such as the one proposed in this bill have been operating in Alaska, Canada and countries around the world. None of these programs have seen adverse effects to the patients being served.

An article in the November 2008 Journal of the American Dental Association, "Assessment of Treatment Provided by Dental Health Aide Therapists in Alaska: A Pilot Study," concluded that, "No significant evidence was found to indicate that irreversible dental treatment provided by [Dental Health Aide Therapists] differs from similar treatment provided by dentists."

This is a reform that will save money, and in this time of such economic distress, ideas like this should be embraced. I look forward to this measure moving forward in the Legislature this session and these practitioners serving as an additional tool for the oral health team.

Thousands of Minnesotans are counting on it.

Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester, represents Senate District 30 in the Minnesota Legislature.