



NEWS RELEASE

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HEALTH ACTION NEW MEXICO LAUNCHES INITIATIVE TO EXPAND ACCESS TO ORAL HEALTH CARE IN THE STATE

As One of Five States New Mexico Will Pursue a Dental Therapist Model to Expand the Reach of Dentists and Increase Access to Dental Care

ALBUQUERQUE NM – Health Action New Mexico announced today that it will lead a pioneering effort to bring the innovative dental therapy provider model to New Mexico to help end serious shortages of accessible and affordable dental care. Three other organizations - Con Alma Health Foundation, New Mexico Health Resources and New Mexico Voices for Children – will support the effort.

“Dental therapists can provide critical services for rural, tribal and underserved communities. We can’t continue to ignore our state’s unmet oral health care needs. Other proposals haven’t worked. It’s time to try one that does,” said Barbara Webber, executive director of Health Action New Mexico.

New Mexico is part of a national movement to expand the dental health team. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation will give five states – Kansas, New Mexico, Ohio, Vermont and Washington – funding and other support to pursue the dental therapist model.

Health Action New Mexico’s announcement comes on the heels of a report recently released from Con Alma Health Foundation calling for New Mexico to pursue an alternative dental workforce model as a way to expand access to sorely needed dental care in rural, tribal and underserved New Mexico communities.

“New Mexico’s rural and tribal communities have spoken,” said Dolores Roybal, executive director of Con Alma Health Foundation. “These communities are interested in exploring a mid-

level dental provider model similar to the dental therapist model as a solution to meeting their dental health needs, and as a long-term, economic career opportunity for their citizens.”

“Rural communities throughout New Mexico have lost jobs and businesses including healthcare providers,” Webber noted. “Now, remaining health professionals are under even more strain to meet the healthcare needs of their communities.”

Dental care is inaccessible or unaffordable for far too many New Mexicans. Thousands of New Mexico families live in areas without enough dentists to meet their needs and many cannot afford oral health care. In fact:

- New Mexico ranks 49th worst in the U.S. in the number of dentists per 1,000 people.
- 69% of New Mexico dentists practice in metropolitan areas.
- Thousands of New Mexicans – many of them children, elders, and persons with disabilities – do not have access to necessary dental care or must wait more than 6 months for it.
- As a result, too many New Mexicans:
 - Live in pain
 - Miss school or work, contributing to lost productivity and lower academic performance.
 - Face in rare instances life threatening medical emergencies as a result of untreated dental infections.
 - Develop preventable more serious, long-term health problems.

The New Mexico Mission of Mercy (NMMOM) two-day, free dental clinic held in October 2010, demonstrated that lack of access to dental care has reached a crisis in New Mexico. More than 2,000 New Mexicans, most of whom had no dental coverage or could not afford dental care, camped outside, standing in line for days for free dental services at the NMMOM dental clinic. Many had experienced months if not years of pain and crumbling teeth. Dental professionals and other community volunteers came together to provide more than 8,000 services during the clinic. Unfortunately, the long-term need for dental services is so dire that many left without all of their needs being met and with few choices for timely follow-up care.

Dental Therapists: A Solution for New Mexico

Dental Therapists:

- Are dental providers who practice under the general supervision of dentists to provide safe, high-quality, cost-effective dental services to rural and tribal communities. (RTI Alaska dental therapist program study, Oct. 2010. See link to study below.)
- Are homegrown, culturally competent providers, selected by their communities, who return to practice in their home community.
- Complete more than 3,000 hours of rigorous, competency-based education, training and clinical experience.
- Expand the reach of dentists to underserved and remote communities using telemedicine.
- Have provided care since 2006, in remote Alaskan tribal villages. They are well-established in many other industrialized countries, like New Zealand and the U.K., where

they have provided oral health services to underserved communities for more than 80 years.

- New Mexico already relies on mid-level providers such as physician assistants, nurse anesthetists, dental hygienists, and certified midwives, to provide vital healthcare services.

“It is time now for more states to seriously consider new and proven approaches – such as the dental therapist model – as a way to bring critically needed oral health care services to vulnerable children and families,” said Sterling K. Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “Oral health is essential to overall health, yet good, regular oral health care is out of reach for far too many people in this country.”

Important Links:

Con Alma Health Foundation – www.conalma.org

Key Findings Report on New Mexico’s Oral Health Gap 2009-2010

RTI Dental Therapist Alaska Study: <http://www.wkkf.org/news/Articles/2010/10/Alaska-Dental-Therapist-Program-Study.aspx>

Press Packet Items:

- Health Action New Mexico (HANM) Dental Therapists Project Fact Sheet
- About Health Action New Mexico Fact Sheet
- New York Times Article
- Indian Country Today Article

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