

November 3, 2010

Eddie Snethen  
Kansas Association for Local Health Departments  
300 SW 8th 3rd Flr  
Topeka, KS 66612

Dear Edie:

When it comes to the dental profession, Kansas is facing a serious workforce shortage. Today, hundreds of thousands of Kansans – particularly those living in rural communities – cannot access the dental care they need to stay healthy. In fact, 91 Kansas counties do not have enough dentists to serve their populations; and 14 of those counties have no dentist at all. In the coming years, this particular workforce shortage is only expected to worsen.

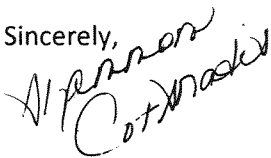
A coalition is forming in Kansas right now to address the problem before it's too late. The coalition – spearheaded by Kansas Action for Children, the Kansas Association for the Medically Underserved and the Kansas Health Consumer Coalition – has carefully studied the options and has focused on a solution that has been utilized for decades in other countries and, more recently, in the United States. As part of our work to address the workforce shortage in Kansas, we will be proposing to the Kansas Legislature that a new dental professional - a Dental Therapist – be permitted to practice in Kansas.

Dental Therapists are trained to provide evaluation, preventative services and basic restorative services. Like other mid-level professionals (i.e. nurse practitioners, physician's assistants, etc.), Dental Therapists can be a critical part of the dental team, allowing more Kansans to obtain the dental care they need at a price they can afford. We are enclosing a brief to provide you with more detailed information about the role of a Dental Therapist.

As part of our effort to address the dental workforce shortage in Kansas, we are seeking partners – like you - who recognize the importance of increasing access, especially for Kansans living in rural or underserved areas. We believe you and your organization would be an invaluable voice as a member of the Kansas Dental Project Coalition, and we invite you to join us!

To join the coalition, simply return the enclosed sign-up form. If you have any questions about the project, please don't hesitate to contact Shannon Cotsoradis at 785-232-0550 or [shannon@kac.org](mailto:shannon@kac.org). We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,



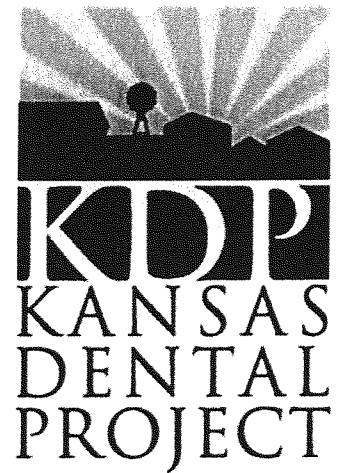
Shannon Cotsoradis  
Kansas Action for Children



Cathy Harding  
Kansas Association for the  
Medically Underserved (KAMU)



Anna Lambertson  
Kansas Health  
Consumer Coalition



[www.kansasdental.com](http://www.kansasdental.com)

The Kansas Dental Project is a collaborative effort by Kansas citizens, community leaders and health care professionals to address the dental workforce shortage in Kansas and improve access to dental care for Kansans in rural and underserved areas.

The Kansas Dental Project is spearheaded by:

**Kansas Action for Children**  
720 SW Jackson, Suite 201  
Topeka, Kansas 66603  
785.232.0550

**Kansas Association for the Medically Underserved**  
1129 S Kansas, Suite B  
Topeka, Kansas 66612  
785.233.8483

**Kansas Health Consumer Coalition**  
534 S Kansas, Suite 1220  
Topeka, Kansas 66603  
785.232.9997



# Filling the Gap

*Addressing the dental workforce shortage in Kansas*

Because of population shifts, many communities in Kansas are facing a workforce shortage problem. Over the past few decades, rural communities in particular have lost their grocery stores, their retail shops and their local hospitals. They've also lost their local dentists.

## We have a dental workforce shortage in Kansas.

Despite charity care and incentives to recruit doctors to smaller communities, the lack of access to dental care remains a challenge for most communities. In fact, 91 Kansas counties no longer have enough dentists to serve their residents. Fourteen of those counties have no dentist at all.

Our dental workforce shortage is compounded by the fact that only 25% of Kansas dentists accept patients insured through Medicaid. Comparatively, 89% of Kansas physicians accept Medicaid patients as part of their practice. Furthermore, the vast majority (63%) of Kansas dentists practice only in urban areas. Over time, the gap has continued to grow between the handful of urban counties that have an adequate number of dentists and the remainder of the state's counties, where the dental needs of residents are largely unmet. The shortage of dentists in Kansas is only expected to worsen over the next decade as the dental workforce continues to age and fewer dentists opt to practice in non-urban counties.

## The dental workforce shortage is resulting in serious health problems for Kansans.

Without access to a dentist, hundreds of thousands of Kansans go without dental services, which often leads to more serious health problems. That's because dental health isn't just about teeth. We know that untreated dental problems can result in major medical problems, including heart disease, diabetes and stroke. And, dental-related problems continue to burden our community hospitals and clinics through costly emergency room visits and uncompensated care. In fact, more than 6,000 ER visits occur every year in Kansas because of dental problems.

Vulnerable Kansans – such as senior citizens, the disabled and children – are particularly affected by the lack of access to dental care in Kansas. When it comes to children, for instance, poor dental health can lead to lifelong medical problems and greatly impact their ability to learn in school. However, 55% of Kansas third-graders have experienced tooth decay despite the fact most have dental insurance.

### What is a Dental Therapist?

Dental therapists operate in partnership with dentists much like the partnership between nurse practitioners and medical doctors. Dental therapists are permitted to operate independently, but under the general supervision of a dentist. Dental therapists are trained to provide evaluation and preventive services, including inspection; dental radiography; cleaning above the gum line; and basic restorative services, such as tooth preparation (drilling), tooth restoration (filling) and simple extractions. Dental therapists are not permitted to do the advanced restorative services that dentists provide, such as root canals.

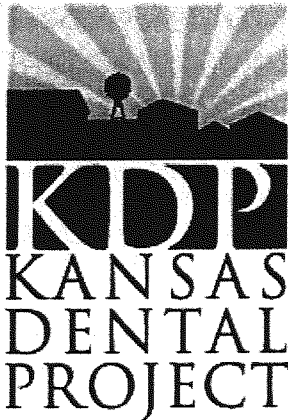
## This is a problem we can solve in Kansas.

Unlike some of the other workforce shortage problems facing our state, the shortage of dentists is a problem we can solve – not just with a quick fix, but with a long-term solution that's proven to work. Other states have begun to address their dental workforce shortages by adding a new member, a Dental Therapist, to the dental team. And, at least 40 other countries have been successful in utilizing Dental Therapists to improve access to dental care. We can solve this workforce shortage in Kansas and provide more Kansans with access to dental care by training Dental Therapists to work in our state.

## It's a solution that's both cost-effective and proven to work.

Dental Therapists could never replace dentists, but they can be a critical part of the dental team, working under the supervision of a dentist to provide preventive care and routine procedures. The Dental Therapist model provides dentists with the opportunity to grow their practices and see more patients, with the support of a skilled dental team behind them. And, it lets dental practices provide routine care in a more cost-effective setting – much like nurse practitioners working alongside nurses and medical doctors.

The Dental Therapist model is a cost-effective and proven way to improve the health of Kansans. Not only does the model offer opportunities to train local people who can return to their hometowns to find work under a supervising dentist, but it also offers an opportunity to provide rural and underinsured Kansans with the quality, affordable services they need.



The Kansas Dental Project welcomes organizations from across Kansas to join in our effort to increase access to dental care. As part of our work to address the workforce shortage in Kansas, we will be proposing to the Kansas Legislature that a new dental professional - a Dental Therapist – be permitted to practice in Kansas.

Members of the coalition will be identified as supporters of the Kansas Dental Project, and will be encouraged to speak up in support of the project. Coalition members will receive regular updates about the projects that they may pass on to their membership.

### **Agreement to join the coalition**

*The undersigned organization wishes to join the Kansas Dental Project Coalition:*

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of authorized signer: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to:



Kansas Action for Children  
720 SW Jackson, Suite 201  
Topeka, KS 66603  
(785) 232-0699 (fax)  
kac@kac.org