Everyone in New Mexico Deserves Access to Routine Dental Care

On Monday, March 16, the New Mexico House passed HB 349, legislation that would increase access to affordable, quality dental care for all New Mexico communities, including Tribes and Pueblos, by adding providers known as dental therapists. The matter now goes to the New Mexico Senate as SB 6. We, the undersigned American Indian Tribes, Pueblos, and Tribal Organizations, applaud the House for its action and strongly urge the Senate to pass its bill. Increasing this access will ensure that people across the state have access to safe and affordable dental treatment and prevention services.

Tribal communities nationwide, like many underserved populations, suffer from a variety of dental afflictions. For example, over 80% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children suffer from dental caries by the age of eight, compared with 50 percent for the same age for the rest of the population. Our children ages 2 to 5 have an average of six decayed teeth, when children in the U.S. all races population have only one. In one New Mexico Pueblo, 70 percent of adults and 58 percent of children suffer from untreated dental decay. This results in missed school or work and decreased ability to eat healthy foods. Poor dental health puts individuals at greater risk for cardiovascular disease, respiratory infections, dementia and diabetes.

Lack of prevention services and a severe provider shortage across New Mexico and throughout the country contribute to these problems. Many Tribes are located in rural areas, and most are in dental provider shortage areas. Even those living in urban areas have little to no access to dental care. Fortunately, a sensible and time-tested solution to these problems exists.

Dental Health Aide Therapists – or DHATs – are mid-level oral health practitioners that provide reliable, safe, and culturally appropriate dental care. Almost all other industrialized countries already utilize DHATs. Tribes in Alaska pioneered the DHAT model in the United States in 2003. This program has resulted in over 40,000 more people in approximately 25 rural Alaska Native communities having access to dental care for the first time. The program has had no evidence of malpractice and 95% of patients report being satisfied or very satisfied with the services they received from a DHAT.

DHATs are supervised by a dentist and have a limited scope of practice that focuses on routine dental maintenance and prevention services. This provider framework extends the ability of dentists to serve communities much in the same way that nurse practitioners or physician assistants extend the reach of doctors. DHAT support also allows dentists to focus on more complicated and risky procedures. With the routine prevention services that DHATs provide, patients can avoid acute conditions that otherwise might require an emergency room visit. In every respect, the DHAT model brings superior results. Tribes outside of Alaska deserve and demand access to this mid-level dental care that results in a better quality of life and significant cost savings.

Tribes and Tribal organizations across Indian Country have shown their support for mid-level dental provider programs like the DHAT model by passing resolutions of support. These include the Southern
Pueblos Council, Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, among many others.

Despite the tremendous success of the DHAT program, the model has its opponents. After the program was established in Alaska, the American Dental Association went on the offensive. They added language to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to try and diminish Tribal sovereign authority to determine the delivery of health care services in Tribal Nations. This unprecedented interference has put up additional barriers for Tribes to pursue the DHAT model in Indian Country.

Tribes reject this intrusion and violation of the sovereign rights of Tribal Nations. For this reason and the others already stated, the undersigned Tribes, Pueblos and Tribal Organizations come together to urge the New Mexico State Senate to swiftly pass SB 6.

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