

## **National Indian Health Board Launches Tribal Oral Health Initiative to Build #HealthyCommunities in Indian Country**

Tribal communities nationwide, like many underserved populations, suffer from a variety of dental afflictions. 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. Poor oral health in children can result in missed school or work and decreased ability to eat healthy foods. Poor oral health also puts individuals at greater risk for cardiovascular disease, respiratory infections, dementia and diabetes.

In response to these statistics and the real people that are suffering, NIHB launched the Tribal Oral Health Initiative to advocate for solutions. Dental Therapists have emerged as a solution to Indian Country's oral health crisis. Mid-level primary oral healthcare providers, dental therapists (DTs) offer basic clinical dental treatment, focusing on routine and preventative services. A lack of prevention services and a severe provider shortage throughout Indian Country contribute to the current problems.

DTs are certified to provide the simplest and most common dental procedures under the general supervision of a dentist, meeting a significant portion of patient need. This frees up dentists to focus on more challenging cases and practice at the top of their scope.

Dental therapists receive the same training as dentists for the areas of practice in which they overlap. After finishing a rigorous two calendar year program, DTs in training complete a 400 hour preceptorship under the supervision of a dentist. DTs then begin practicing, typically in rural areas, where the unmet oral health needs are the highest.

The dental therapy model has been used in rural Alaska Native communities since 2004, as part of the Community Health Aide Program. Additionally, the Swinomish Tribe in Washington State has employed a DT since January 2016. The program is helping that Tribe meet its oral healthcare needs and is saving the Tribe money. Two Tribes in Oregon have also begun implementing dental therapy as part of a pilot program.

Dental therapists have a proven track record in improving the oral healthcare delivery system in Indian Country. Unfortunately, due to the way the federal government interprets a provision of the Indian Healthcare Improvement Act, it is more difficult, but not impossible, for Tribes to adopt dental therapy for themselves. NIHB will continue its advocacy work as dental therapists help build #HealthyCommunities and #HealthyTribalCommunities.

You can learn more about NIHB's Tribal Oral Health Initiative [HERE](#).