

Remarks for June 18, 2025 PA Senate Committee Hearing on Rural Oral Health
University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine

Good afternoon. I am Joan Gluch, Professor of Clinical Community Oral Health in the Division of Community Oral Health and Associate Dean for Academic Policies at the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. I do wish to remind you that the University of Pennsylvania is a private University and the the School of Dental Medicine receives no Commonwealth funds. We are one of the Commonwealth's largest Medicaid providers and directly serve multiple underserved communities in and around Philadelphia. We are the largest provider of care to persons with disabilities in Philadelphia. I want to thank Senator Argall, legislators, and staff for organizing this hearing on the very important topic of rural oral health.

Increasing access to oral health care for Pennsylvanians in rural communities requires a multi-layered approach. In my remarks this afternoon, I would like to highlight three issues: Expanding the dental workforce in rural areas of Pennsylvania, increasing the pipeline for dental care providers, and leveraging technology to increase access to care.

Since over 60% of rural counties in Pennsylvania are designated as Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (DHPSAs), access to routine and emergency dental care is limited for many Pennsylvania residents. Targeted loan repayment programs at the state and national level provide financial incentives for dentists and dental hygienists, making it more appealing for graduating dentists to practice in underserved areas to reduce their loan debt. For the past five years, approximately 10% of PDM students each year have received National Health Service Corps scholarships, with a required service obligation to practice in an underserved area after graduation. PDM students have also been competitive for the federal and state loan repayment programs after graduation. While these scholarship and loan repayment programs succeed in initial recruitment, many dentists leave the underserved area once their service obligation ends. Retention of dentists in rural areas is more likely when dentists have personal ties to rural life, such as being raised in a rural area or having participated in rural externships during their training.

Programs that combine loan repayment with other strategies tend to have better outcomes. To ensure a sustainable pipeline of dental professionals in rural areas, targeted pipeline programs are essential. These initiatives can include mentorship opportunities, scholarships, and guaranteed admission pathways for rural students into dental schools. Programs that offer incentives such as loan forgiveness or residency placements in rural clinics can encourage dental graduates to return and serve their communities. By nurturing local talent and reducing the financial and logistical barriers to dental education, these pipeline programs can help build a workforce that is both skilled and committed to improving oral health care access in rural regions.

Nurturing local Pennsylvania talent is especially important because residents in PA have the lowest per capita dental school application and acceptance rates of the six largest states, including California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. Among

PA residents, there were only 2.6 per 1 million state resident dental school applicants and only 1.3 per 1 million state resident dental school acceptances in the 2023-2024 admission cycle. These rates are well below Florida's rate of 4.1 per 1 million state resident dental school applicants and below New York's rate of 2.3 per 1 million state resident acceptances to dental school. The data has remained consistent over the four years of tracking by the American Dental Education Association. Many residents in our state are not considering careers in dentistry, resulting in a lack of top student applicants from Pennsylvania to dental schools.

We believe that integrating STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education in Pennsylvania high schools with a focus on health sciences can spark early interest in dental careers. By incorporating modules on oral biology, dental hygiene, and the science behind oral diseases, students in rural areas can gain a foundational understanding of oral health. This exposure not only raises awareness about the importance of dental care but also helps students envision themselves in health-related professions, potentially addressing the shortage of dental professionals in underserved areas.

In addition to STEM-focused curricula, teaching oral health as a core component of health education in both high schools and colleges can significantly improve community awareness and preventive care practices. Educators can collaborate with local dental professionals to provide workshops, demonstrations, and interactive sessions that emphasize the impact of diet on dental health, daily oral hygiene and fluoride use, and the importance of regular dental care. These programs empower students to become advocates for oral health within their families and communities, creating a ripple effect that enhances public health outcomes.

As the last component, we suggest leveraging technology to increase oral health access in rural health areas to bridge the gap in areas where providers are scarce. For example, developing models of teledentistry has the potential to expand consultations and follow-up care, especially with the disabled and those unable to travel. Mobile and portable dental equipment provide the potential for targeted care delivery in remote communities, especially when integrated with medical care facilities.

Lack of access to dental care in rural areas has become dire, since rural counties experienced a 14.2% decrease in licensed dentists from 2015 to 2021, compared to just 3.5% in urban areas, according to the Pennsylvania Coalition of Oral Health. To reverse this trend, Pennsylvania must include a multi-dimensional strategy to build a sustainable dental workforce with long-term investment in education. Examples of combining proven strategies include strengthening high school and college STEM education, developing a strong pipeline of students from rural counties to dental schools, increasing the number of dental students from Pennsylvania to apply and be accepted to dental schools, expanding rural training sites and externships and incentivizing rural practice through loan repayment programs, housing stipends, and tax benefits. Our goal is a resilient and equitable oral health care system in rural Pennsylvania, and the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine remains committed to working with all of our colleagues to achieve this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, and this concludes my remarks.