

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of rural dental care in Pennsylvania. I am Dr. Karen Rainey. I am a dentist in Pennsylvania and currently the director of the Dental Health Department at Luzerne County Community College in Nanticoke, PA. Our Dental Health Department currently has a dental hygiene program and an Expanded Function Dental Assisting program.

My perspective is as a dental professional that has worked in rural Pennsylvania. For ten years, from 2009 to 2019 I practiced dentistry in Bradford County. During that time, I witnessed firsthand the challenges our rural communities face when it comes to accessing dental care.

In Bradford County, I saw patients who had to travel long distances just to get routine cleanings and exams. I saw men who delayed care because they couldn't afford to take time off from work and only came in when the pain got too hard to bear. I saw children with untreated cavities because single mothers were overwhelmed. I saw seniors who needed new dentures and tried to repair their old ones themselves because they couldn't afford new ones. These were not isolated incidents – this is typical of what I saw on a daily basis.

One of the most persistent barriers I encountered was the lack of dental insurance. Most of my patients had no coverage at all. And even if they did have Medical Assistance, coverage was extremely limited. The lack of specialists in the area made it nearly impossible to get any dental care beyond the most basic. I'll never forget a 16-year-old girl who came to the office with a complicated front tooth that needed root canal treatment. She had Medical Assistance coverage, but the nearest endodontist who accepted her plan was over four hours away. And the wait time for an appointment was several months. I sat with her and her mother as they both cried – not just from frustration, but from the very real fear that this beautiful teenager might lose a front tooth simply because she lived in the wrong zip code. That moment has stayed with me. It was painful to witness and has increased my empathy for people in rural areas.

Now, in my current role as the director of both the Dental Hygiene and the Expanded Function Dental Assisting programs at Luzerne County Community College, I continue to see the effects of these challenges. I receive phone calls regularly from dental offices desperate to hire dental hygienists, dental assistants, or EFDAs. Some offices call from as far away as Clearfield County, three hours away from our school! I have heard over and over how difficult it is to find and retain dental assistants and dental hygienists. These offices are often working with skeleton crews, and the shortage of trained staff is making it even harder to provide timely quality care. Dentists have told me that their dental hygienist wants to retire, but the dentist doesn't know how the office will be able to continue operating without the hygienist.

The workforce shortage is a serious issue. Without enough dental hygienists, dental assistants, and EFDAs, even the most dedicated dentists cannot function efficiently. Procedures take longer, patient wait times increase, and burnout becomes a real threat. In rural areas, where recruiting is already difficult, these pressures can lead to frequent turnover of staff. In Pennsylvania dentists can train dental assistants on the job, but I have heard over and over from dentists how disruptive and slow that process is. And then one day the assistant that is being trained on the job, just stops coming to work, leaving the dentist once again desperate for another assistant.

But I believe there are solutions. First, we need to invest in local training pipelines. That means supporting community colleges and vocational programs that can train dental assistants and EFDAs close to home. When students can learn and work in their own communities, they're far more likely to stay and serve in those communities. I believe this includes supporting the development of a new dental school in Pennsylvania. According to the 2023 PA Dentist and Dental Hygienist Workforce Survey Report, "only 17.9% of dentists provided direct patient care in rural counties in Pennsylvania, substantially lower than 82.1% of dentists in urban counties." Currently all three dental schools in PA are in large metropolitan areas. But a dental school in northeastern or central Pennsylvania whose mission would be to improve dental care in underserved areas could help educate future dentists who will return to their hometown to serve their neighbors. Until a new dental school is opened, incentives – scholarships, student loan forgiveness, stipends - should be explored for recruiting dentists, and other dental professionals to serve in rural communities.

Additionally, the role of Expanded Function Dental Assistants needs to be fully recognized and utilized. EFDAs are highly trained dental professionals who can perform a wide range of restorative procedures under the supervision of a dentist. When EFDAs are utilized, the dental team can serve more patients more efficiently.

Finally, I want to emphasize that rural Pennsylvanians deserve the same standard of dental care as anyone else in the Commonwealth. They deserve to see a provider without waiting months. They deserve to have their pain addressed. And they deserve to be treated with dignity.

Thank you for your commitment to improving dental care in rural Pennsylvania.