

Opening Statement: PA Senate Majority Public Hearing

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Topic: 'Dental Workforce Shortages and their Impact on Health'

Good afternoon, Chairman Argall and members of the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee. I very much appreciate the invitation to participate in today's session.

My name is Charles Cohen, and I'm the Managing Director of Benco Dental Company, the nation's third largest distributor of dental products and services in the United States. Founded by my grandfather Ben in 1930 as a one-man operation here in Northeastern PA; today, our 1600 employees serve dental practices and laboratories across the nation. Last year, our sales were nearly \$1 billion.

I believe I have a unique perspective on the workforce questions that we're discussing today. I'm not a practitioner, but I talk with practitioners every day, and my organization exists to serve them. I sit here today, but my family's roots in the dental profession go back nearly a century. I'm a PA native, proud to live and work in this commonwealth, but my perspective on dentistry is national. And I lead a successful for-profit enterprise, but my passion for dentistry and oral health care go beyond dollars and cents.

We assemble today at an inflection point in dentistry...we have more demand for dental care than the profession can handle, in large part because our current staffing model is broken.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with how a dental practice actually operates, please allow me to use a sports analogy. If dentistry were a sport, most of us would think of it as a solo game...think professional golf or tennis, with the dentist as the player. When we watch a golf match, we know that the golfer didn't get there all on his or her own...he or she has helpers like a caddy, a trainer, a nutritionist, a scheduler, and a financial advisor. But the golfer is the center of attention, from the first hole to the 18th, winning or losing the tournament based primarily on his or her performance.

While dentistry may have been a solo profession in the past, today's dental practices are closer to a team sport, like basketball or football, than golf.

A generation ago, dentists worked in smaller offices with fewer team members and less technology. As practiced today, the dental team works together to deliver excellent dental care, efficiently. The dentist may be the captain of the team, but the supporting players...in this case, hygienists, dental assistants, and business staffers...play vital roles in delivering dental care.

The result? Dentistry today is more efficient and productive than ever before. Average dental spending per dentist, our best estimate of dentist efficiency, increased by 55% in inflation-adjusted dollars from 2000 to 2024...meaning that each U.S. dentist today produces 55% more dental care than 25 years ago. That's a success story that we don't talk about enough.

Several trends, working together, have contributed to this exciting improvement...primarily technological advancements (think: digital imaging, 3D printing, improved software, better products) and practice model/workforce improvements (think: expanded function dental assistants, better trained hygienists, larger facilities, and new delivery models like Community Health Centers).

These two trends are often complimentary...for example, new digital oral scanners enable a well-trained dental assistant to perform clinical tasks today that only a dentist could perform a generation ago, making today's dentists more efficient. In the right hands...and when we have enough of those hands...technology becomes a force multiplier for the delivery of oral health care.

But we've got one significant bottleneck: we need more, and better trained, dental auxiliaries...hygienists and assistants. Here's a stat should get our attention: in 2023, we had about the same number of hygienists as dentists delivering care in Pennsylvania...about 8700 hygienists and 8300 doctors. Imagine how many more patients could be treated if we increased that ratio to two hygienists for every one dentist.

These roles are well paid, require modest training, and provide upward career mobility for those who choose them. Our ask today is for the commonwealth to help drive these changes through financial and regulatory support. If we approach this challenge with innovative thinking and a modest budget, we can clear this bottleneck. Together, we can make the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania...with our three leading dental schools, 13 dental hygiene programs, four accredited dental assisting programs, and 8300 dentists...even more of a leader in the practice of dentistry, and improve the oral health of our citizens.

Thanks again for convening today's session, and for taking on this important challenge.