

Subject: Written Testimony on Rural Oral Health Workforce Challenges in Pennsylvania

Chairperson, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for this hearing on strengthening rural Pennsylvania, especially as it is being held here in Hermitage. I regret that I am unable to attend in person due to a prior speaking commitment and appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective in writing.

I am a practicing dentist in western Pennsylvania and serve as President of the Pennsylvania Academy of General Dentistry. I am also someone who is actively trying to hire and retain the workforce this discussion is centered around.

From where I sit, the workforce shortages described in your Rural Health Transformation Plan are not something we are preparing for. They are already here.

It is increasingly difficult to find and keep dental hygienists, and hiring and retaining dental assistants has become a challenge as well. When those positions go unfilled, the impact is immediate.

In my own office, there are days when a hygiene chair that should be treating patients sits empty. That means patients who were due for preventive care are pushed weeks or months out. Some do not reschedule. Others return later with more advanced problems that could have been avoided.

There have also been times when we could not expand our schedule, not because there was no demand, but because we did not have the staff to support it. That is a difficult position when you know there are patients in your community who are ready and willing to receive care.

This is not unique to my office. Dentists across Pennsylvania, especially in rural areas, are facing the same reality. We are competing for a limited workforce and adjusting how we deliver care because of it.

In recent discussions with dental hygiene leadership, including the Pennsylvania Dental Hygienists' Association, it became clear that this shortage is being driven by a constrained educational pipeline and ongoing turnover. There is strong interest in the

profession, but programs cannot expand to meet demand. At the same time, many hygienists leave clinical practice earlier than expected.

We are seeing similar challenges on the dentist side, particularly in rural areas, where recruitment remains difficult despite strong demand. This reinforces the need to build a pipeline by training providers in rural settings and recruiting students from those communities.

Your report identifies this well. If we want providers in rural Pennsylvania, we need to train them there and support them staying there.

From where we are in practice, this now requires urgency. Offices are making real-time decisions about capacity based on staffing. If we cannot stabilize the workforce, particularly hygienists and assistants, access to care will continue to tighten in rural communities.

You have identified the problem. I am here to confirm that it is real, it is happening now, and it is affecting patients today.

We need to support the full dental team, strengthen recruitment and retention, and make it more feasible to practice in rural areas. If we can do that, we can stabilize access. If we do not, it will continue to decline.

Thank you for your attention to this issue and for holding this discussion in a community like Hermitage, where these challenges are very real.

Respectfully,

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