

## Senate Majority Policy Committee Hearing on Dental Workforce Shortages and their Impact on Health

Good afternoon Chairman Argall and members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee.

This hearing on Dental Workforce Shortages and their Impact on Health comes at a time where we as an organization have been spending a lot of time at our monthly board meetings discussing this same topic.

Scranton Primary Health Care Center is the only Federally Qualified Health Center in Lackawanna County. We are proud to say we have been serving greater Lackawanna County for the last 48 years, when we first opened our doors to provide care for indigent woman. Over the years since that humble beginning, we added pediatrics, family & internal medicine, women's health, gynecology and pre-natal and post-partum services. In fact, our OB deliveries account for approximately 10% of the annual deliveries at Moses Taylor Hospital. We also offer behavioral health and limited ophthalmology services. We added general dentistry 24 years ago and the demand keeps increasing. A little about our patient demographics, over 60% of our patients are at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Levels, and approximately 25% are uninsured. We suspect the uninsured will grow with the end of marketplace subsidies, and the planned Medicaid reforms.

As a FQHC we are tasked by the Federal Government with providing care to all members of our community regardless of their ability to pay, including the homeless, the uninsured and under-insured. This is accomplished through a sliding scale based on family size and income that is linked to the Federal poverty levels published annually. In dentistry, the sliding scale applies to services we perform directly, and not lab services for things like mouthguards, crowns, bridges, and dentures.

This presents an interesting dilemma; as an example, most public insurances generally provide for one set of dentures for the life of the patient. If the dentures become damaged, are lost, or no longer fit properly because the patient has gained or lost weight, they are out of luck and responsible for the replacement cost.

We at Scranton Primary understand the nexus between good oral health and good physical health. For example, how can we ask a patient with diabetes or weight issues to eat healthy, if they are missing some or all of their teeth! Studies have shown that ~16% of all ER visits are dental related. Regardless of the community, large or small, affluent or poor, Hospital ER's and urgent care facilities are not equipped to deal with dental issues. The standard protocol is to provide the patient with an antibiotic in the event of an infection or abscess, and pain killers if they are in pain, and then tell the patient to call a dentist in the morning. I would suggest receiving pain meds and having challenges finding a dentist in a timely manner doesn't help the opioid problem in this country.

We as a community health center, after much deliberation made a conscious decision some thirteen years ago to do what we could to make dental health a priority and affordable for our patients. We made a policy change in an effort to provide responsible dental care to all. Most FQHC's practice what I call MASH dentistry; either drill and fill or extract. When we did an extraction, unless a patient had the ability to pay, or were

covered by insurance that would cover the cost of partials or bridges or dentures, they were left with a space or spaces in their mouth. As part of the policy change, we decided first and foremost we would invest in the necessary equipment and hire Dentists who are capable of also performing root canals and other more complicated procedures. We have invested large sums of money in technology that many dentist offices still do not have, such as: a 3D Cone Beam panoramic scanner, intra-oral digital scanner, hand-held digital imaging equipment, and 3D printing equipment that allows us to make mouthguards and crowns in-house while the patient waits, eliminating a return visit.

The Scranton Area Foundation has partnered with us in a program called Confident Smiles. This program helps unemployed woman with resume building, job coaching, babysitting services, and if necessary, smile restoration. After all, most of us are probably guilty of judging a book by its cover so to speak. If we have two job applicants to choose between, all things being equal, we are usually going to choose the person with a nice smile thinking they take better care of themselves, as opposed to the person with missing teeth.

You may remember that earlier I said we serve greater Lackawanna County. I am familiar with at least one dental patient who travelled from Chambersburg multiple times for care, because they were unable to find a dentist locally who would see them and perform the necessary work. For those of you who are geographically challenged like me, Chambersburg is almost three hours away. We routinely see patients from neighboring counties like Luzerne, Wayne, Susquehanna, Wyoming Monroe & Pike counties.

Now that you have an understanding of who we are and what we do, please let me tell you about the challenges we face. With the retirement of one of our dentists in December, we currently employ one full-time and one part-time dentist who works three days a week. This is supported by 2 ½ Public Health Dental Hygiene Practitioners, four expanded function dental assistants and one dental assistant. We have been looking for a full-time dentist for several months, as well as 1-2 EFDA's and or dental assistants for a longer period of time. In the meantime, our waiting list for new patients is approximately 6 months. We are also trying to raise capital to expand the number of operatories in our dental clinic so we can add another dentist and hygienist. We have also been looking for a dentist and hygienist to staff a newly built dental clinic at one of our satellite offices. We pay market rate for all positions, but there are very few applicants at all levels.

Many of the dentists we interview, claim to have \$450,000.00 – 550,000.00 in student loans. While we are able to offer tuition reimbursement through the National Health Service Corp or PA Loan Repayment Program, I don't believe the reimbursement amounts have changed in the 13 years I have been CEO, and don't come close to addressing the average debt aspiring young dentists graduate with.

In closing, I must say I am rather disappointed in the lack of progress in this area. Five years ago, I testified before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging about the same topic, I feel like the needle has not moved at all.

In closing, please indulge me and allow me to read a social media post from two years ago that a gentleman who received care from our Dental Clinic took the time to post. In an effort to protect the individual's privacy, I will call him George. George posted; I am a 66 year old veteran of the US Navy and have been a patient of the Ed Dulworth Dental Center for the past several months. I have been dealing with dental problems almost my entire life, which finally culminated in the loss of most of my teeth, which made it almost impossible to chew most foods. Since my dental problems were not 100% service related, the Navy would not cover the cost of treatment. I searched far and wide for help when I came across SPHCC. They were a Godsend!! I am so excited, I am just a few weeks away from getting my dentures and being able to eat again! The greatest thing about the Dental Clinic was they worked hard to set up a payment plan I could afford and didn't make me pay in advance. After they learned more about my personal financial situation, they actually forgave my remaining debt and thanked ME for my service to our Country!! I have NEVER been so touched in my life! THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU! I CAN NOT RECOMMEND THESE GUYS ENOUGH! With today's news being filled with man's inhumanity to man, it's nice to know there are still people who care!  
George - U.S.N., 1970-74

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee for the opportunity to present today. And a special thank you to Joshua Paul for the logistics and planning.