

Dental Concerns and Issues in Pennsylvania

Dear Senator Dave Argall,

I am honored to be asked to speak at the April 13, 2026, meeting.

I have been practicing general dentistry for over 32 years in Pittston, and I continue to truly enjoy both patient care and the ongoing development of my practice. At Casey Dental, we are proud to offer a comprehensive, multi-specialty approach, including general dentistry, oral surgery, orthodontics, implant dentistry, and care for patients with special needs.

In addition to my clinical work, I am a member of the Academy of General Dentistry and currently serve on the Pennsylvania State Board of Dentistry.

I was born and raised in Northeastern Pennsylvania. I attended Wilkes College and earned my dental degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine.

Over the course of my career, I have developed strong perspectives on the current dental environment. I believe it is important to share these thoughts openly, and I hope that through discussion and collaboration, we can contribute to meaningful improvements and help shape a stronger future for the profession of dentistry.

Thank you for the opportunity,

Respectively,

Shawn Casey, DMD

Key issues

- **Access to care:** A high number of dentists over age 60; some communities (especially rural) find it difficult to support a local practice.
- **Low reimbursement rates:** Some providers refuse to participate in Medicaid due to reimbursement levels. The main issue for low participation rate.
- **Practice infrastructure:** Solo practices are slowly going away because they are difficult to sustain.

- **Workforce and education pipeline:** Limited education facilities for hygiene and dental assisting/EFDA programs; challenges in developing/retaining the workforce in PA.
- **Debt burden / ROI:** Dentist student debt is high, making it hard to buy or take over dental practices and discouraging entry into the profession.

Contributors

- **Cost of running a practice:** Technology fees, staff wages, supply costs, lab costs, and overall cost of doing business. Need a large infrastructure to support multiple providers.
- **Capacity constraints in small offices:** Typical 4-chair model limits appointment availability; cancellations cause lost production and lost care opportunities. This model in dentistry is very challenging to support anymore
- **Practice transition challenges:** Older equipment and limited space make practices less attractive to new graduates; student debt increases the risk of purchase.
- **Reimbursement pressure:** Insurance reimbursement is a main driver to support practices.
- **Workforce economics:** Dentists face long payback periods on education; specialties generally earn more than general dentists.

Data

- Dentist student debt range (average): **\$450,000–\$550,000** (some higher).
- PA average general dentist's income mentioned: Average **\$150,000 to \$180,000/year**. This will take 15-20 years to pay off. Not a good investment for education
- Specialist income mentioned (low end): **\$250,000/year**. To \$450,000 depending on the specialty. Better investment compared to general dentistry.
- Hygienist education ROI mentioned: **\$25,000–\$30,000** investment; salary **\$62,000+/year**. This works and is a great return on their education
- Assistant/EFDA education ROI mentioned: **\$4,000–\$6,000** investment; salary **\$45,000+/year**. Again, this works and is a great return on their education.
- Dental school admissions concern: **50–60%** (sometimes higher) are students from **out-of-state**.

Impacts to Improve

- Reduced access for dental services in certain PA communities.
- Difficulty sustaining or selling solo practices.
- Reduced ability to mentor/train the next generation in small practices.
- Potential long-term workforce shortages for dentists, hygienists, and EFDAs.

Solutions / Recommendations

- **Increase PA resident admissions in PA dental schools:** Aim for a significantly higher share of in-state residents (suggestion stated: up to 90%) to build and retain the PA workforce. This is, in my opinion, the NUMBER 1 priority. We need to invest in our own PA residents.
- **EFDA scope of practice idea:** My Number 2 Opinion to Consider allowing trained EFDAs to administer local anesthetic (argument: workflow efficiency—EFDA brings patient back, reviews history, prepares room, administers anesthetic; dentist focuses on procedure; hygienists already administer local anesthetic. That model works for Hygiene to manage their patient more efficiently. If an EFDA is allowed to do this, it will be a great help to dentists to provide more patient care.
- **Promote licensing pathway: Act 41** was cited as a strong program for out-of-state individuals to obtain licensure in PA (data requested/unknown on uptake for dentists).
- **Shared responsibility ("Everyone Do Their Part"):**
 - Dentists and specialists participate in some Medicaid programs/patient populations to support their communities.
 - Promote dentistry careers and workforce development (counteract discouragement among current dentists).
- **Education funding support:**
 - Endowment investment at PA Dental Schools to help offset education.
 - Developing a fund to offset education for Pennsylvania residents entering the dental field (requirements: PA residency and PA schooling; county-based option for those who want to return to practice in their hometown.
 - Encourage dentist-sponsored education support (e.g., sponsoring radiology certificate, EFDA certification, hygiene training) as a workforce investment.
 - Develop and support community college programs for Hygiene and Dental Assisting /EFDA.
- **Medicaid reimbursement reform:**

- Increase rates (noted as a long-discussed issue). Low reimbursement rates are the main complaint, which is why dentists are not accepting it.
 - Consider student debt support programs for participating dentists (example suggested: **\$5,000/year** toward debt).
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- **Practice model/infrastructure shift:** Recommend and Design offices for **6+ chairs** to improve efficiency/profitability and support staffing and technology; recognize corporate dentistry growth and potential student debt support offered by some corporations.