

Bill to allow dental therapists to practice in state clears first hurdle

[Chris Howley](#) February 9, 2018 , 4:30 am



Dental Health Practitioners Needed by County

By Katie Campbell



Apache County	31	Greenlee County	4	Pima County	52
Cochise County	29	La Paz County	12	Pinal County	54
Cocconino County	41	Maricopa County	88	Santa Cruz County	8
Gila County	18	Mohave County	12	Yavapai County	26
Graham County	18	Navajo County	42	Yuma County	22

Using data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in April, this chart illustrates how many practitioners are needed in each county to alleviate the shortage this year, amounting to 432 practitioners statewide when accounting for areas that overlap. The five counties highlighted in red above have been entirely designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas.

A Senate committee passed a hotly contested, bipartisan bill on February 7 that proposes to license dental therapists in Arizona.

The Health and Human Services Committee passed SB1377 in a 4-3 vote on Feb. 7 that saw one Democrat crossing the aisle in support and two Republicans voting against the committee chairwoman’s bill.

The bill would allow a person to be trained and licensed by the Arizona Board of Dental Examiners and employed in both public and private dental care settings throughout the state.

Their practice is defined as an assistant who is allowed to perform simple dental procedures, such as tooth extractions and regular evaluations. They would operate under the supervision of a licensed dentist, who will have the authority to choose which procedures the dental therapist can perform and intervene whenever needed.

If the bill becomes law, Arizona would join Minnesota, Maine and Vermont on the list of states to license dental therapists, said Sen. Nancy Barto, R-Phoenix, the bill's prime sponsor and chairwoman of the Health and Human Services Committee.

But Kevin Earle, executive director of the Arizona Dental Association, said those other states are not good examples.

Earle said of the 77 dental therapists in Minnesota only a small fraction are in rural areas like the ones Arizona needs to address.

Earle also said of the states that allow these professionals, all the models are different and there is no one overall proven system that has been successful.

Earle added that he is aware of the shortage of dental care in Arizona, but insists that the dental work be done by well-educated and well-trained dentists.

However, according to the main advocate for the bill, Dental Care for Arizona, the legislation has already gained overwhelming support from legislators who are members of the Indigenous People's Caucus and the Latino Caucus.

“Implementing dental therapists can help reduce the need in underserved populations, both rural and urban, and help create healthy communities and a healthy workforce,” said Sen. Juan Mendez, D- Tempe, co-chair of the Arizona Latino Caucus.

The bill was also assigned to the Senate Education Committee, and there is no scheduled hearing yet.