

COCONINO VOICES

Coconino Voices: Dental therapists would fill oral care gap on Rez

Senator Jamescita Mae Peshlakai - Special to the Daily Sun - Mar 10, 2018

If you've ever suffered from tooth pain, you know the throbbing, aching feeling that goes all the way to your very core. When you have that kind of dental pain, you can't get to the dentist fast enough. Now imagine that same pain in your child's mouth. If you're me, and you've raised your children on the Navajo Nation, the nearest dentist is likely 1 to 3 hours away. But that might not be the biggest hurdle, because even if you get there, there's no guarantee that there will be a dentist available to treat your child. As a parent, you're helpless. You're trying to access care that simply isn't available.

This is a reality for the 4.6 million Arizonans, young and old, who live in a federally designated dental health professional shortage area, meaning there simply aren't enough dentists to serve the

population. And this is not only a problem for tribal communities across the state, but also for many parents in rural and urban areas alike.

In Navajo County alone, 70 percent of preschoolers suffer from untreated decay compared to 11 percent for that age group elsewhere. And within Arizona's Indian Health Services system, there is a 36 percent vacancy rate for dentists in Navajo Nation. That amounts to a total of 22 vacant dentist positions. We can help address this if the dentists we do have can employ and supervise a team of trained dental therapists to help fill the gap. This is a no-brainer.

When I came to this issue, I couldn't see how anyone would reject the overwhelming evidence that prove dental therapists are safe and effective. But then I saw the industry lobby for dentists at the Capitol spreading misinformation in a misguided effort to prevent Arizona's most neglected communities from having the option to use highly trained and skilled dental therapists in order to serve the immense need. When I learned that the American Dental Association (ADA) sued to keep Native Alaskans from employing dental therapists, I realized the opposition isn't fighting for the health of communities or patient safety, but simply trying to

keep dentists as the sole arbiters of oral healthcare.

The ADA failed to stop Alaska's dental therapists then, and now over 40,000 Alaska Natives in 81 remote communities are getting regular access to safe, effective, high quality care. A recent peer-reviewed study showed that after 10 years, Alaska Native communities served by dental therapists actually have improved oral health, compared to communities without them. We cannot let organized dentistry kill this effort here, in our state. We have vast rural areas, with dispersed populations, and everyone deserves access to dental care.

No matter their efforts, I have faith that the truth, evidence and logic will prevail for my legislative colleagues. ...This industry should not be allowed to stall or prevent a model that is proven effective in serving remote tribal and rural communities, and the underserved among us. Arizonans should be able to choose which safe, proven and effective oral healthcare models will work in their communities.

State Sen. Jamescita Mae Peshlakai represents Legislative District 7, which includes all of parts of Apache, Coconino, Gila, Graham, Mohave, Navajo and Pinal counties and nine tribes.

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