

VERMONT LEGAL AID, INC.

OFFICE OF THE HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE

264 NORTH WINOOSKI AVE. - P.O. Box 1367

BURLINGTON, VERMONT 05402
(802) 863-5620 (VOICE AND TTY)
FAX (802) 863-7152
(800) 747-5022

OFFICES:

BURLINGTON
RUTLAND
ST. JOHNSBURY

OFFICES:

MONTPELIER
SPRINGFIELD

February 26, 2015

Dear Madam Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations,

The Office of the Health Care Advocate strongly supports S.20; an act relating to establishing and regulating licensed dental practitioners. Access to dental care is a significant issue in Vermont, particularly for low-income Vermonters, seniors, and children on Dr. Dynasaur. In 2014, our consumer helpline received over 100 calls from Vermonters having trouble accessing dental care. Many of these calls were from Medicaid beneficiaries who were unable to use their dental benefits because so few dentists in Vermont will accept new Medicaid patients. For example:

- Mr. A transitioned from commercial insurance to Medicaid. Mr. A's dentist then refused to treat him, even though the dentist is a Medicaid provider because the dentist had already reached his quota of Medicaid patients.
- Ms. B needed to see a dentist before she could have a surgical procedure done. She tried to find a dentist through the Medicaid website and found that many of the offices listed as taking new Medicaid patients were not in fact accepting any new Medicaid patients.
- Ms. C's 13-year-old son had a cleaning scheduled at his dental office. When the family got to the appointment, the office refused to see the child because his insurance had switched from a private plan to Medicaid. While the office accepts Medicaid, they would not see him because they were not accepting new Medicaid patients.
- Mr. D called the 31 dentists in Rutland listed as accepting new Medicaid patients and was unable to find one that would see him. Mr. D ended up having a painful tooth extracted during emergency hours at the community health center but was still unable to find a regular dentist.
- Ms. E used to be on VHAP and paid out of pocket at her dentist for years. When she transitioned to Medicaid, she asked her dental office if they would accept her Medicaid. The dental office told her that while they do accept Medicaid, they are not taking any new Medicaid patients. She would be a new Medicaid patient despite her long history as a patient at the practice.

Licensed dental practitioners will help relieve Vermont's dental access problem and will allow more Vermonters to get the dental care they need in their communities. Dentists who choose to employ licensed dental practitioners will have the opportunity to expand their practices. Licensed dental practitioners will provide routine care so that dentists can be more available to provide complex care, and will give Vermont's dental offices an economically viable option for treating more Medicaid patients. To address Vermont's dental access problem, we need cost-effective providers who will care for people in the communities where they live and work.

Sincerely,

Julia Shaw, MPH
Health Care Policy Analyst
Office of the Health Care Advocate
Vermont Legal Aid