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Testimony in Support of House Bill 2139  
House Health and Human Services Committee

Chairman Hawkins and Members of the Committee:

**I am writing to express my strong support for the effort of the State of Kansas to enact a state law to improve the oral health of its citizens.** I am Professor and Dean Emeritus of the University Of Minnesota School Of Dentistry, where we are training Minnesota's dental therapists. Thank you for offering this opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 2139.

We have two programs in Minnesota, one at the University Of Minnesota School Of Dentistry and one at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU). Sixty-four dental therapy graduates are already in practice providing needed dental care to underserved patients and communities in Minnesota. **I am proud of our graduates and am confident that their patients are well-served and receive the highest quality of dental care in a variety of dental practices in our state.**

I firmly believe that dental therapists in Minnesota are well-accepted members of the dental team and are embraced by dentists for whom they are key team members, and by their patients who value their professionalism, skill and care. I believe that the near future will bring the benefits of dental therapy and improved oral health to the public and dental practices across our nation.

Our dental health care system must change to address the ravages of untreated disease. Dental caries remains the number one untreated disease in children and the domiciled elderly, and destroys an essential organ system, the masticatory system in adults. As in other parts of our health care system, our workforce must continue to evolve to embrace the concept of teams, with each team member working at the level consistent with their education and training.

The five-year report on dental therapy from the Minnesota department of health indicates that more dental therapists are serving rural and underserved communities by far than new dentists during the same period. The waiting and travel time for patients has been diminished and access to care for working families and those on public assistance has been improved. The broad distribution of dental therapists in Minnesota to high dental disease underserved areas is a valuable illustration of how this law could work in Kansas, not only supporting the oral health of communities but the sustainability of dental practices in underserved communities.

## ECONOMICS OF DENTAL THERAPY

As the first state to have dental therapy programs to serve the public, Minnesota has been able to study the costs and economic impact of dental therapists over 7 years.

Regarding the cost of education, the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry dental therapy program is a 7-semester one in Minnesota and it results in a Masters of Dental Therapy. The total tuition and fees for completion of the dental therapy program for Minnesotans are \$76,613 over 3 years. The DDS program is an 11 semester program and the tuition and fees for completion of the DDS program for Minnesotans are \$ 209,383. Thus the direct costs of educating a dental therapist are about 1/3 the costs of educating a dentist.

Regarding the costs of care, from the patient (care recipient perspective) waiting times for urgent appointments have been reduced 30% (from 46% less than a week appointment to 18%) in practices with dental therapists. Travel times to appointments have been reduced for patients on public assistance by 16%. With the direct costs of transportation for patients on public assistance and those with special needs, dental therapists have provided this added advantage.

## CONCLUSION

Change is hard and will be resisted by some, but I urge you to stand for our patients, dental practices, and your constituents. I encourage you to support this effort in your state. Dental therapists will reduce costs of dental care and improve access for underserved communities. Our University of Minnesota and MNSCU dental therapy graduates are living proof of that achievement. Thank you for the opportunity to support House Bill 2139.

Sincerely,

Leon A. Assael