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## **ANTHC supports efforts to expand dental health aide program**

Alaska's Dental Health Aide Therapist program is a community-driven, community-led initiative that is meeting a critical public health need in some of our most isolated communities: the need for good, safe oral health care – not just for one or two weeks out of the year, but year-round. This is something that too many of our communities did not have for too long, despite serious efforts to solve this problem through more traditional methods, such as attempting to recruit dentists to practice in these communities.

We pursued those efforts for years. They failed. Meanwhile, our children and families suffered and waited.

They no longer have to wait. The Dental Health Aide Therapist program works, as demonstrated by our recent program evaluation. Our therapists are providing safe, competent care to our communities.

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium is proud to have established the first dental therapist program in the United States, joining the ranks of dozens of countries throughout the world where this model has proved successful for more than 80 years. We appreciate the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Rasmuson Foundation and the Bethel Community Services Foundation, but we want to make clear that the Dental Health Aide Therapist program is our own program, which we developed to solve our problems in our communities.

Access to basic, regular dental care is critical for treating the serious oral health problems that we've seen in so many of our children and families. We desperately need providers who can deliver that care and address the range of oral health needs among our underserved populations on a year-round basis. Working with dentists as part of the dental care team, dental health aide therapists are doing that here in Alaska.

We recognize, however, that dental health aide therapists are only part of the solution. Prevention and oral health education are also crucial. Now that we have a better handle on the severe levels of oral disease that ran rampant in our communities, we will be better able to focus on these areas.

Improving oral health in our communities will require a multifaceted approach that includes treatment, prevention and promotion strategies to address the various determinants of oral health. Alaska's program has come a long way in four years. We are confident that it will go much farther in the years to come, reaffirming that dental therapists can be part of the long-term solution to solving our nation's serious oral health care shortages. Based on our experience, we encourage other states to pursue this model.