



Dental Therapy: Expanding Access to Oral Health Care in Tribal Communities

What Dental Therapy is

Dental Therapists are licensed mid-level oral health providers who work as part of a collaborative dental team. They provide preventive and routine restorative care under a defined scope of practice, helping increase access where provider shortages exist.

What Dental Therapists play a critical role in

- Providing preventive care and oral health education
- Performing routine restorative procedures
- Increasing access to care in rural, Tribal, and underserved communities
- Bringing care closer to patients facing transportation, financial, or geographic barriers
- Supporting dentists so they can focus on more complex procedures

Many Dental Therapists provide care in the communities where they grew up, which enhances trust, improves continuity of care, and offers culturally responsive services while prioritizing the healing of historical trauma.

Why Dental Therapy Matters

Many Tribal communities still face significant barriers to accessing timely dental care.

- 1 dentist per 3,028 patients (national average: 1:1,600) in Indian Country
- Dental vacancy rates as high as 30%; providers rarely stay long-term
- 8 out of 10 AI/AN children have a cavity by age 9 (national average: 45%)
- ~2 million ER visits annually for dental pain—ERs can't treat the cause
- Costly ER care drains limited IHS resources

What Dental Therapy helps with

In the communities they serve, dental therapists:

- Increase access to preventive care in children by 67% and in adults by 47%
- Decrease need for extractions of permanent teeth by 37% and operations under general anesthesia by 31%
- Reduce wait times and increase clinic efficiency
- Cost Tribes or other employers half what a dentist costs, increasing revenue for clinics
- Reduce provider shortages
- Expand access to preventive and restorative services
- Improve oral health outcomes
- Strengthen Tribal health systems
- Build a sustainable oral health workforce

The mouth serves as the gateway to the body, meaning oral health directly impacts your overall physical and emotional well-being.

CRIHB's Commitment to Dental Therapy

Dental Therapy has been practiced around the world for nearly a century and is currently authorized in 8 states and in at least some settings in an additional 6 states.

At the California Rural Indian Health Board, Inc. (CRIHB), we are committed to advancing Dental Therapy as a solution to improve oral health equity for California Tribal communities.

CRIHB has led this effort by:

1 Producing an Educational Film

Developed a Dental Therapy Advocacy Film featuring Tribal leaders, clinic leadership, providers, and community voices to increase awareness and education.

2 Building Statewide Partnerships

Serving as an active member of the California Oral Health Equity Coalition (COHEC) to unite organizations working toward expanding Dental Therapy in California.

3 Providing Education

Hosted a researched-based Dental Therapy webinar featuring experts, educators, Tribal leaders, and providers to share evidence-based information about Dental Therapy.

4 Advocating for Change

Working alongside Tribal communities and partners to build awareness, engage stakeholders, and support a strategic legislative pathway toward Dental Therapy implementation in California.

Get Involved!

- Join CRIHB and the California Oral Health Equity Coalition (COHEC) in advancing Dental Therapy across California.
- Get involved with COHEC at cohec.org and be part of the movement to expand access to oral healthcare, strengthen the dental workforce, and support equitable care for communities across the state.
- **Follow us on Instagram and Facebook:**
- @crihb_1969 | @cohec_ca
- California Rural Indian Health Board Inc. | COHEC

Have questions or want to learn more about getting involved?

Please contact:

👤 Arianna Pretolani, Project Coordinator

👤 Elizabeth Zaragoza, Director of Health Systems Development

✉ apretolani@crihb.org

✉ ezaragoza@crihb.org

📞 (916) 286-7250

📞 916.929.9761 ext. 1300

Together, we can:

- Expand access to oral health care
- Strengthen Tribal communities
- Build a more equitable oral health workforce
- Support Tribal self-determination in health care

