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Bill approved to expand dental care to underserved communities *SB 738 will use pilot projects to treat more low-income, rural Oregonians*

SALEM – The Oregon Senate approved legislation this morning that will expand access to dental services for underserved populations, such as low-income and rural Oregonians. SB 738 allows qualified dental hygienists to provide essential dental hygiene services and creates a process for setting up pilot projects that will help expand access to dental care across the state.

“The current dental workforce model in Oregon is not meeting the needs of all Oregonians. There are too many disparities in oral health,” said Senate Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham), chief sponsor of the bill. “Oral health is an important part of overall health, and as such all Oregonians should have access to oral health, both preventative and basic services. This bill will allow Oregon to pioneer new types of mid-level care in order to improve access to preventative dental care.”

Oral health is vital for sustaining overall health, to getting good nutrition, and for communicating with others. Oral disease often brings disabling pain and can even worsen heart and respiratory conditions and auto-immune diseases. More than half of Oregon’s licensed dentists live in the Portland area and a 2006 study by the Oregon Department of Human Services found that over half of Oregon’s counties endure some type of shortage of dental professionals.

“Too many patients suffer from ailments that are a result of poor dental health,” said Monnes Anderson, a retired public health nurse. “Expanding access to quality dental care is an important part of our overall goal of increasing preventative, comprehensive health care for all Oregonians.”

SB 738 takes three different approaches to improving access to dental care for Oregonians and collects data to evaluate outcomes. These approaches include allowing the Oregon Health Authority to approve pilot projects to test innovative ways of providing everyday dental care to underserved populations, expanding of the scope of practice for Limited Access Permit Dental Hygienists, and creating pilot projects to test a community health worker model for dental health.

Senate Bill 738A is the product of a lengthy mediated workgroup that began in December 2010 and involved the Oregon Dental Association, the Oregon Dental Hygienists Association, and Oregon Oral Health Coalition. The bill now goes to the House for consideration.

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