



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

For decades, Swinomish confronted an oral health crisis of epic proportions: 68% of its community members saw their dental problems go untreated, the rate of tooth decay among youth was four times that of white people, and SITC members who were treated received care from “traveling dentists performing painful procedures in a doublewide trailer.”¹ In response, SITC exercised its sovereignty and self-regulation of healthcare services to bring a solution established by Tribal Nations in Alaska to its community in the lower 48 states: dental health aid therapists (DHATs).² SITC spent two years redesigning the Swinomish Dental Program and developing the first tribal Dental Health Provider Licensing Code.³ The first Swinomish DHAT started seeing patients in 2016, and a year later Washington State recognized Tribal Nations’ authority to license DHATs on tribal lands.⁴ Over the past decade, SITC has become “a state leader in access to dental hygiene,”⁵ with its DHATs providing roughly 50 primary dental prevention and treatment services under the supervision of a licensed dentist, dramatically increasing SITC members’ access to routine and preventative care and reducing wait times for patients from months to same-week and even same-day appointments.⁶ To develop its DHAT workforce, SITC initially partnered with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium⁷ to train its DHAT providers, and in 2022 it launched the *dəx̣ẉx̣ayəbus* Dental Therapy Education Program, a rigorous, accredited, three-year DHAT training curriculum delivered with Skagit Valley College.⁸ SITC also expanded its regulatory authority⁹ to not only license *everyone* who works in its clinic – including its dentists, DHATs, and dental hygienists – but also those who *train* its dental therapy providers.¹⁰ SITC provides regular trainings to maintain “competent provider” status for all of its licensed providers that emphasize cultural responsiveness and meet state requirements for continuing education and license renewals.¹¹ Growing a template any Tribe can follow,¹² SITC has drastically improved access to “high quality, culturally competent, primary oral health care,” eliminating the traumatic treatment experiences members long endured.¹³

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RELATED RESOURCES

[Swinomish Indian Tribal Community Code Title 15, Chapter 11: Dental Health Provider Licensing](#)

[Building a 21st Century Dental Team at Swinomish Indian Tribal Community \(PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[The Swinomish Dental Therapy Story \(video\)](#)

[TribalSelfGov.org: Fighting Tooth for Tooth: Swinomish Dental Therapist Program](#)

[Skagit Valley College: dəx̣ẉx̣ayəbus Dental Therapy Program](#)

[Indian Country Today: Washington state expands dental therapist program](#)

[The Seattle Times: WA expands role of dental therapists, hoping to improve oral health](#)

[King5: Dental therapy program aims to fight tooth decay and distress for Native Americans \(video\)](#)

[National Partnership for Dental Therapy: Lessons from How a Community College and Tribe Partnered on Health Workforce Education](#)

[National Partnership for Dental Therapy: How a Community College and a Tribe are Rethinking Health Workforce Education \(video\)](#)



- ¹ Eric Wilkinson, “Dental therapy program aims to fight tooth decay and distress for Native Americans,” King5.com, September 14, 2022 (<https://www.king5.com/article/news/regional/native-america/dental-therapy-program-swinomish-indian-tribal-community-fights-tooth-decay-distress/281-599e9007-c7be-42c3-941d-0d9e1aca3cc8>, accessed April 12, 2024).
- ² Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, *Honoring Nations 2021 Semifinalist Descriptions*, Honoring Nations Awards Program, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2021, p. 5. SITC was the first Tribal Nation in the lower 48 states to do so.
- ³ TribalSelfGov.org, “Fighting Tooth for Tooth: Swinomish Dental Therapist Program,” *Sovereign Nations*, March 2016, Issue 1, p. 3 (https://www.tribalselfgov.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SGCE_Newsletter_Q1_web_FINAL.pdf, accessed April 12, 2024). According to Director Stephen T. LeCuyer of SITC’s Office of the Tribal Attorney, “It’s a great example of the exercise of Tribal sovereignty – licensing a Dental Therapist who is working as a Tribal employee in a Tribal Dental Clinic built with Tribal funding on Tribal lands, providing much needed services to the Tribal community” (Ibid.). To view the Code, go to: <https://swinomish.org/MEDIA/48067/1511DENTAL.PDF>. SITC’s Tort Claims Act also covers the operations of the Swinomish Dental Clinic.
- ⁴ Washington State Legislature, *Chapter 70.350 RW: Dental Health Aid Therapists*, 2017 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=70.350&full=true>, accessed September 18, 2024). As of the date of this toolkit’s publication, the Indian Health Service still does not have a federal certification process nor provides Tribal Nations with the same licensing recognition that meets or exceeds federal community health aide program certification board standards. The lack of recognition of tribal licensing limits a quintessential exercise of Tribal sovereignty to license qualified providers by requiring licensure only through the Indian Health Service. Meanwhile, in April 2023, the State of Washington passed a law recognizing DHATs across the state, which will expand dental therapy access to the sizeable Native population living in urban areas outside of tribal lands. The law also recognized DHATs as reimbursable providers, which serves to eliminate “confusion with the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which had denied Medicaid reimbursement until ordered to do so by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals” (Joaqlin Estus, “Washington state expands dental therapist program,” *Indian Country Today*, May 18, 2023 (<https://ictnews.org/news/washington-state-expands-dental-therapist-program>, accessed April 12, 2024)).
- ⁵ Elise Takahama, “WA expands role of dental therapists, hoping to improve oral health,” *The Seattle Times*, May 19, 2023 (<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/wa-expands-role-of-dental-therapists-hoping-to-improve-oral-health/>, accessed August 15, 2024).
- ⁶ Takahama, May 19, 2023. DHATs are “licensed midlevel providers who often play a support role for dentists...In Washington and some other parts of the country that have developed programs, dental therapists have worked to expand access to oral hygiene, particularly in rural, underserved communities” (Ibid). DHATs typically perform “more complicated procedures than hygienists, like fillings while leaving the more advanced measures to actual dentists. That brings more people into the profession – specifically more Native American people.” SITC’s DHATs also “visit the children’s health clinic every week teaching them about the importance of eating right and getting good dental care” (Wilkinson).
- ⁷ Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, “Alaska Dental Therapy Education Program” webpage (<https://www.anthc.org/alaska-dental-therapy-education-programs/>, accessed September 18, 2024).
- ⁸ “d̥əx̥ʷx̥əy̥əbus” is a Lushootseed phrase that means “Place of Smiles.” It became the first education program of its kind in the lower 48 contiguous states to receive accreditation from the Commission on Dental Accreditation “after a decade of advocacy, collaboration, planning, developing, and implementation” between SITC and Skagit Valley College (Skagit Valley College, “Skagit Valley College and Swinomish Indian Tribal Community partner to launch a new nationally accredited Dental Therapy Education program,” Skagit Valley College website, August 19, 2022). To limit the time and cost burden on its students, the three-year program condenses three academic years into just over two calendar years, offers a workplace-like schedule of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. for classroom instruction and giving students hands-on experience in the Swinomish Dental Clinic, and uses “a cohort structure for mutual support, a culturally relevant and evidence-based model” (Laura Brannon, “Lessons from How a Community College and Tribe Partnered on Health Workforce Education,” National Partnership for Dental Therapy, January 23, 2023 (<https://www.dentaltherapy.org/blog/lessons-from-a-how-a-community-college-and-tribe-partnered-on-health-workforce-education>, accessed April 12, 2024)). The program culminates in a preceptorship involving three-day intensive session with the supervising dentists of the trainees (Skagit Valley College, August 19, 2022). According to SITC Chairman Steve Edwards, “There is an unmet need for dental therapists, and now this training program will make dental therapy training available here in Washington, so students won’t have to move far from home to learn these valuable skills” (Ibid.).
- ⁹ Geoffrey D. Strommer et al., “Tribal Sovereign Authority and Self-Regulation of Health Care Services: The Legal Framework and the Swinomish Tribe’s Dental Health Program,” *Journal of Health Care Law & Policy*, Volume 21, Issue, 2, 2019 (<https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/jhclp/vol21/iss2/2/>, accessed September 18, 2024).
- ¹⁰ SITC created and issues a Faculty Teaching license for those educating its dental therapy providers. It also now licenses dental therapy providers working for the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe and Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.
- ¹¹ Swinomish Indian Tribal Community Dental Therapy Program, Conversation with NCAI, July 23, 2024.
- ¹² TribalSelfGov.org, March 2016, p. 3.

¹³ Takahama, May 19, 2023; Wilkinson, September 14, 2022. According to Dr. Rachael Hogan, Dental Director of the Swinomish Dental Clinic, “This is just one example of how dental therapy models increase representation of underserved and underseen communities. We are a dental home to our patients where they have ownership of their treatment and we are accountable to them to provide only the best care” (Estus, May 18, 2023).