

## Five Bipartisan Healthcare Bills Become Law

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin

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<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/healthcare-dental-s439.jpg>



### ***Package to Improve Access to Dental Healthcare, Bolster Healthcare Workforce.***

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MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers today, at a public bill signing ceremony at Northcentral Technical College (NTC) in Wausau, took action on a package of five bipartisan bills aimed at improving access to dental healthcare, particularly in rural communities, and bolstering the dental workforce. The governor signed this legislation at NTC as they offer premier dental hygienist and dental assistant programs, and the college will be allocated up to \$2 million to support these programs and develop a new dental therapy program under the provisions of Senate Bill 702, which is one of the bills in the package signed today.



“The health and well-being of our state and our economy depend on the health and well-being of our communities, including ensuring that all Wisconsinites have access to quality, affordable healthcare. I am proud to sign these five bipartisan bills that will move us forward in our work to address shortages and bolster our dental healthcare workforce while also closing gaps in access across the state,” said Gov. Evers. “Coupled with my administration’s new Healthcare Workforce Task Force, these bills will help us build upon our administration’s work to support and strengthen this workforce and ensure more folks can get the dental care they need, especially in our rural communities while finding real, long-term solutions to address the challenges our healthcare industry faces today.”

This bill package comes as, earlier this week, Gov. Evers [signed](#) Executive Order #220 to create the Governor’s Task Force on the Healthcare Workforce. The task force, led by Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez, will be charged with studying the workforce challenges facing the state’s healthcare systems and creating an action plan with solutions related to workforce

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development, industry innovation, education, and training for consideration in the governor's 2025-27 biennial budget.

Notably, the package includes Senate Bill 689, now 2024 Wisconsin Act 87, which authorizes the licensure of dental therapists, a mid-level dental provider similar to a physician's assistant who will be able to provide both preventive and restorative services and help fill gaps in care in areas where there are shortages of dentists. According to [January 2024 data](#) from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, there are 160 dental care health professional shortage areas in the state. Under the bill, dental therapists must either limit their practice to federally defined dental shortage areas or practice in settings where at least 50 percent of their patient base consists of certain specified populations, such as Medicaid patients, uninsured patients, residents of long-term care facilities, Tribal citizens, and veterans. Gov. Evers has proposed licensure of dental therapists in three consecutive biennial budgets, but despite bipartisan support, the provision has been removed from the budget by Republicans on the Joint Committee on Finance (JFC) each time, and standalone legislation has similarly been blocked by Republican leadership until now.

Another bill in the package, Senate Bill 702, would significantly improve the ability of technical colleges across the state to support and strengthen the dental and oral hygiene workforce, as it provides guidelines for the allocation of \$20 million for oral healthcare workforce initiatives that was set aside for the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) in the JFC's supplemental appropriation during the 2023-25 biennial budget process. Under the bill, the WTCS Board must submit a plan to the JFC that allocates up to \$2 million for NTC to expand its current dental hygienist and dental assistant programs and to develop a new dental therapy program. The plan must also provide up to \$1.43 million for any other technical college that offers a dental hygienist program and up to \$1 million for any technical college that currently does not offer a dental program or only a dental assistant program to create a new program or expand an existing program. Apart from these allocations, other eligible expenditures under the bill include capital expenditures, such as expenditures for equipment or facility improvements or expansion, expenditures for instructional supplies, teaching materials, and resources, or clinic fees, and hiring bonuses of up to \$5,000 for oral health care instructors if certain requirements are satisfied.

This bill package builds upon Gov. Evers and the Evers Administration's previous efforts to expand access to dental care and bolster the dental healthcare workforce. The 2019-21 biennial budget signed by Gov. Evers provided an additional \$2 million for the DHS's oral health program, including \$1.2 million to increase funding for dental clinics that serve low-income patients and \$750,000 to increase funding for the Seal-A-Smile program, which provides preventive and restorative dental services for kids in K-12 schools. The 2019-21 budget also provided a \$2.5 million increase in Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services provided to individuals with disabilities. Further, the 2021-23 biennial budget signed by Gov. Evers provided a 40 percent increase in Medicaid reimbursement rates and provided \$120,000 to increase funding for dental loan repayments for dentists who provide services in rural areas.

In addition to the \$20 million allocated for oral healthcare workforce initiatives mentioned above, the recent 2023-25 biennial budget signed by Gov. Evers this past year also provided:

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- \$5 million in the JFC's supplemental appropriation to establish a general dentistry residency program for the Marquette Dental School;
- \$10.7 million to assist with the cost of construction and equipment upgrades for the Marquette University School of Dentistry, which will help increase the supply of dentists in the state, improving accessibility to dental care and improving dental health outcomes; and
- Nearly \$4.8 million to assist with the expansion costs of the Children's Hospital Dental Center, which will improve access to dental care for kids and reduce the burden on the state's urgent and emergency care departments, lowering overall dental care costs.

The bills the governor signed include:

[Senate Bill 689](#) , now 2024 Wisconsin Act 87:

- Authorizes licensure of dental therapists, who are healthcare providers who may engage in the limited practice of dentistry;
- Specifies certain criteria an individual must meet to be granted a dental therapist license by the Dental Examining Board, including completion of a qualifying dental therapy education program and passage of required examinations;
- Specifies that dental therapists may provide dental therapy services only as an employee of specified employers and only under the supervision of a dentist who is either similarly employed or who directly employs the dental therapist; and
- Requires that dental therapists limit their practice to federally defined dental shortage areas or practice in settings where at least 50 percent of their patient base consists of certain specified populations, such as Medicaid patients, uninsured patients, residents of long-term care facilities, Tribal citizens, and veterans.

[Senate Bill 692](#) , now 2024 Wisconsin Act 88:

- Ratifies and enters Wisconsin into the Dentist and Dental Hygienist Compact, providing individuals with the ability to become eligible to practice in Wisconsin and other compact states.

[Senate Bill 702](#) , now 2024 Wisconsin Act 89:

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- Provides guidelines for the \$20 million oral healthcare workforce program that was created in 2023 Wisconsin Act 19, the 2023-25 biennial budget;
- Specifies that the Technical College System Board, in coordination with the technical colleges, may submit a plan to the JFC to request the funding, and the plan should identify each technical college that requests funding, the amount of funding requested, and a description of proposed expenditures; and
- Requires that the submitted plan include requests for: (a) up to \$2 million for NTC to expand its current dental hygienist and dental assistant programs and to develop a dental therapy program; (b) up to \$1.43 million for any other technical college that offers a dental hygienist program on the effective date of the bill; and (c) up to \$1 million for any technical college that currently does not offer a dental program or only a dental assistant program, to create a new program or expand an existing program.

[Senate Bill 706](#) , now 2024 Wisconsin Act 90:

- Modifies the existing health services scholarship program to address the lack of dental professionals throughout the state by limiting eligibility to students enrolled in the Marquette University School of Dentistry who agree to practice dentistry in a dental health shortage area for 18 months for each annual scholarship received; and
- Requires the Higher Education Aids Board to provide \$350,000 annually to the School of Dentistry for the development and operation of programs that support recruiting and training of rural dentistry students.

[Assembly Bill 62](#) , now 2024 Wisconsin Act 91:

- Allows those with dental insurance coverage to assign reimbursement for dental services to a specific dental provider, removing the need for patients to cover the cost of care at the point of service and wait for reimbursement from their insurance provider.