

The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association

Volume 105 | Number 7

Article 4

7-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Dawley, Joanne DDS, FAGD (2023) "Overcoming the Dental Assistant Shortage Starts Here," *The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association*: Vol. 105: No. 7, Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation/vol105/iss7/4>

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Overcoming the Dental Assistant Shortage Starts Here

By Joanne Dawley, DDS, FAGD

The workforce shortage is a challenge impacting the entire dental profession, and Michigan is no exception. According to a recent report from the Bureau of Health Workforce Health Resources and Services Administration, our state has 248 designated dental health professional shortage areas. The lack of dental office support staff, including registered dental assistants, led the Michigan Dental Association to list the shortage as a top priority in 2022.

To reverse this trend, the dental community needs to

come together to support comprehensive national, local, and practice strategies that address the root causes and lay the foundation to make dental assisting a rewarding, meaningful, and sustainable career. There are several strategies we can individually and collectively implement at the national, local, and practice level to make a difference.

The Dental Assisting National Board and the DALE Foundation's new strategic plan centers on developing solutions to the dental assistant workforce challenges. To help grow the pipeline of



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qualified dental assistants, DANB is conducting a comprehensive review of its exams and certification programs.

We have already begun this

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A former MDA president and past chair of the Dental Assisting National Board reflects on the current dental assistant workforce problem and offers some strategies to move forward, both nationally and closer to home.

Commentary
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work, beginning with our Dental Assisting Profession Job Task Analysis Workshop, hosted in May. The workshop was attended by 20 dental professionals, including dental assistants, dentists, clinical coordinators, office managers, educators, and consultants from across the country. In selecting members to attend the workshop, DANB prioritized diversity of geographic representation, background, culture, and experience.

Additionally, in the coming months DANB plans to:

- Offer select exams in Spanish.
- Evaluate exam and certification pricing, content, and policies.
- Expand the pathways for dental assistants to earn certification.
- Remove barriers to the exam application and certification process to increase access.

DANB aims to support the recruitment and retention of dental assistants over the long term by establishing a uniform model for the profession

to encourage entry into the profession and promote career retention. We will be conducting listening sessions, deploying surveys, and forming a workgroup to hear from a variety of voices and perspectives in dentistry to develop a model that reflects the changing needs of the profession.

Local strategies

RDAs in Michigan are required to attend a CODA-accredited program, yet the number of programs has declined from eight to six since 2019. Dental assisting can be a launch pad to other dental careers — as the number of CODA programs decreases, the shortage of RDAs could result in fewer candidates for dental hygiene, office management, dentistry, and more.

Several schools in our state are working to address the workforce shortage, including the North Central Michigan College fast-track program, the Northwestern Michigan College partnership, the Bay Mills Community College partnership, and Washtenaw Community College's Alternative Dental Assistant Education Project.

Likewise, Woodhaven High School offers a rigorous program that incor-

porates materials from the DALE Foundation and gives students the opportunity to pursue DANB exams and certification. The success of this program led to the development of the DALE Foundation's new Dental Assisting Curriculum Framework, a resource to support entry-level dental assistant training.

Practice strategies

The entire dental community should unite to strengthen the profession and position dental assisting as a visible and valued career. As dentists, we have the power to build great cultures in our practices, where each member of the dental team is recognized and appreciated for their role.

Dentistry can attract and retain dental assistants by increasing awareness and access to training and education. Investing in your dental assistants' education and encouraging them to earn certification expands their knowledge and skills, and it can also foster greater career commitment. DANB's Dental Assistants Salary and Satisfaction Survey shows that dental assistants who earn DANB's Certified Dental Assistant certification are more likely to view dental assisting as a career, and more likely to stay with their current employer.

Enhancing the profession, together

We look forward to working with members of the dental community to elevate and support dental assistants. To connect with us, please fill out the form at surveymonkey.com/r/Contact-DANB, or email communications@danb.org. ●

Joanne Dawley, DDS, maintains a general dental practice in Southfield. She is an active member and former president of the Michigan Dental Association. She is a past chair of DANB's Board of Directors and currently serves on the Board of Trustees for the DALE Foundation.



Assisting shortage — The entire dental community needs to work together to find workable solutions for the current workforce shortage. (Photo courtesy DANB.)