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House Health and Human Services Committee
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Sean Gatewood, Interim Executive Director
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to provide written testimony today.

My name is Sean Gatewood and I am the Interim Executive Director of the Kansas Health Consumer Coalition, a statewide organization with the mission of advocating for affordable, accessible and quality health care in Kansas.

My staff and I have heard first-hand as well as through healthcare professionals from around the state about the struggles many Kansans experience in seeking affordable dental care. We have gathered stories from people across Kansas. Many of them travel long distances to receive dental care because of long waiting lists and an inadequate supply of providers in their own communities. Often they spend months in pain, waiting for an appointment. But because they lack access to regular, routine care, their dental decay and poor oral health worsen. By the time they can get an appointment or see a dentist, their only option is have their teeth pulled to avoid further complications.

We have spoken to school nurses from around the state that have told us about academically talented children that are crying in pain in their offices and there is nothing the nurse can do for them. There is no Medicaid providing dentist in town and the parents cannot travel during office hours if the staff is able to find pro-bono services. We have visited nursing homes and spoken to seniors that have to “sort of waller” food around in their mouth long enough so that they do not choke, because they cannot chew it and there is no dentist that will come to the facility. We have seen all members of families with dental issues and the parents have problems finding employment because of the social aspect of missing, or having bad teeth. We hear all of the time how bad teeth negatively effect people all over the state, but there is a solution.

We are deeply concerned that people are forced to choose between feeding their families and getting the basic dental care they need. And we want people to be able to more easily access dental care in their own community.

We believe that the Registered Dental Practitioner (RDP) is the only option that Kansas can pursue that will effectively and efficiently move the needle on this problem.

The RDP could provide care in a local safety-net clinic so that Yarnell, Amy and Kathy wouldn't have to spend their already limited incomes on gas to travel long distances for a basic cleaning or filling. But more importantly, the RDP could provide this care before the oral health conditions of these and many other Kansans worsen to the point of having to extract teeth. Pulling teeth can be necessary, but extractions can put many low-income, uninsured Kansans at an additional disadvantage; missing teeth negatively impact people's confidence and ability to maintain employment.

We believe that adding a Registered Dental Practitioner to the dental workforce in our state is the most efficient and effective way to eliminate some barriers that far too many Kansans experience in trying to access affordable dental care. Thank you for taking a closer look at the benefits of creating this workforce model in Kansas.