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**Testimony in Support of House Bill 2139
House Health and Human Services Committee**

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On behalf of Heartland Community Health Center in Douglas County, and all those in need, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2139.

My name is Dr. Mollie Day, and I am the Dental Director at Heartland Community Health Center in Lawrence. Heartland is one of the 22 safety net clinics in Kansas that provide dental care regardless of a patient's ability to pay. I have been a dentist for 14 years. When I graduated dental school, I began working in a private dental program. I made the switch to a community health center when I realized I wanted to do more to help communities, and to help make the needed changes at their root. I have worked in safety net clinics for 5 years to help make those changes take place— with education, preventative treatment, and access to routine care.

I support allowing Kansas dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists because, just like you, I want to help people. As a dentist, I realize that dental therapists are a tool to do just that:

- Dental therapists will create another way for safety net clinics to connect those in need with life-changing services. Since dental therapists cost less to employ than dentists, safety net clinics can utilize them to provide routine care to more patients.
- Dental therapists will free up dentists to have time for more advanced, time-consuming, and often-costly procedures, allowing the entire dental team to work more efficiently.
- While it may be a difficult time to fund or supplement the state health system, allowing dental therapists to practice will help support the state's health care needs at no cost to the state. Furthermore, this is an investment in communities that can create jobs and generate revenue.
- And most importantly, increased access to dental care brings dignity and opportunity to those less fortunate, giving them greater access to jobs and better health.

I have personally witnessed dental therapists working successfully in Alaska and Minnesota. In much of Alaska, canoe, boat, and snowmobile are the main sources of transportation – access is a clear issue. In Kansas, driving long distances for care can be just as daunting for people with limited transportation options. 87 of our state's 105 counties lack enough dental providers to meet their needs. When you add in the fact that very few dentists accept KanCare insurance, it is clear that we need additional tools to help safety net clinics reach underserved Kansans.

Dental therapists would help our safety net clinics serve many more Kansans. Heartland Community Health Center is a Federal Qualified Health Center (FQHC) that is currently beginning a dental program and working hand-in-hand with Douglas County Dental Clinic (DCDC) to increase access to oral health for **all** in our service area, regardless of income or insurance status. A dental therapist would allow Heartland to serve more people and supplement the work of DCDC to reach more people needing

preventative oral health. If we could hire dental therapists, we would be able to maximize federal and state funding and keep people out of emergency rooms for oral health issues, preventing larger health complications and saving taxpayer funding. **We need dental therapists to help us meet the need for dental care in our community.** In Douglas County our dental safety net clinic has 3 operatories going unused, while dental scheduling is full. DCDC director Julie Branstrom reports the clinic cannot afford to hire a dentist to use these rooms and see more patients who are waiting to get in. The clinic could, however, afford to hire a dental therapist that would see 2,000 – 3,000 patients per year. Dental therapists would make a significant difference for the dental care safety net in our community and the cost would only be \$0.30 for every \$1 generated.

I am confident that these dental therapists would provide high-quality care. Dental therapists will not replace dentists. Instead, they will extend the reach of the oral health care delivery system. This will make it easier and more affordable for underserved populations, including children and the elderly, to obtain oral health services. **As a dentist, I will be responsible for guaranteeing that the dental therapists I supervise provide the highest-quality care to our patients.**

This matters because every Kansan should be able to access oral health care. As Kansas journalist Sarah Smarsh points out in her article *Poor Teeth*, bad teeth are too often blamed on the habits and choices of their owners, and can be a source of great shame for people who can't afford to access dentistry. I have seen firsthand how economics plays a key role in children's oral health. As I have gone from school to school providing care to children in Kansas, school nurses and parents repeatedly tell me how grateful they are to have dental care for their kids. We cannot expect children to be able think about their school work or focus in class when they are in pain.

One of my most rewarding experiences was working at a high school in Johnson County. When the kids heard we were there providing dental care, numerous children came down to sign up for the program. They knew all too well that going to a dentist was financially out of reach for their family. They understood that their family couldn't afford to go to the dentist, and this would be their only opportunity to receive dental care. By the time many of those children grow up to be adults, they have learned that oral health care is out of reach. They have acquiesced to the fates of less job opportunity, less money, less confidence, and less emotional fortitude to keep seeking out emergency dental care. If this is the path from childhood, then tooth decay and eventual extraction are inevitable, and so is forgoing routine care.

Allowing safety net clinics to hire dental therapists would help remove these barriers to oral health access, thereby changing the overall health of individuals and families, creating strength in communities and the state, and helping to provide avenues out of the poverty cycle. We should not be coming from the perspective that the dental therapist will weaken the quality of our oral health system or threaten the role or expertise of the dentist. We should come from a position of recognizing the strength that healthier individuals will create for our state. We will have more employed individuals. We will educate and train professionals, through our schools and programs, and place them back in their communities to share knowledge, provide services, and lift up others.

The success has been documented and the value has been illustrated. So let's not be a barrier that keeps people tethered to the poverty cycle, without proper care and without opportunities. **Help me help people, and allow me to hire dental therapists.** Thank you for the opportunity to support House Bill 2139.