



*Northwest Portland Area  
Indian Health Board*  
Indian Leadership for Indian Health

## **Governor Signs First Bill of 2017: Recognizing Tribal Sovereignty in Oral Health**

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Olympia, WA--Today Governor Jay Inslee signed [SSB 5079](#) recognizing Tribal Dental Health Aide Therapists (DHAT) and securing access to federal funding needed to sustain clinics that use this mid-level provider. SSB 5079 sailed through the state legislature with bi-partisan support this year—its 4<sup>th</sup> year attempting to get approved.

The new law is widely supported by [Tribes and tribal organizations](#) across Washington. Senator John McCoy, D-Tulalip, first started working on this issue after the Alaska DHAT program started 12 years ago, and is the prime sponsor of the bill that was signed today.

Brian Cladoosby, Chairman of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, and President of the National Congress of American Indians stated, “This bill is first and foremost about sovereignty—the right and responsibility of tribal governments to take care of their people, including oral health. DHAT programs are a proven, tribal solution to the oral health crisis in Indian Country that increases and improves access, increases the number of native oral health providers, and reduces costs.”

One year ago, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community hired DHAT Daniel Kennedy, who became the first tribally-licensed DHAT in the lower-48. Because Swinomish created their own licensing board under their innate sovereign authority, the state had no role in approving or denying the license. However, for Tribes that have fewer resources and infrastructure to license their own providers, this new law recognizes the authority of a tribal government to hire federally-certified DHATs.

Mel Tonasket, Vice Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, and former Washington State Board of Health Commissioner added, “Our Tribe has 9000 members and a reservation that stretches over 1.3 million acres of remote northeastern Washington. Like every other part of rural Washington, we have challenges to recruit, hire, and retain dental

providers. We need providers that come from our community and want to serve our community.”

Importantly, this law allows Tribes to use their much-needed Indian Health Service funding, and creates a pathway for Medicaid reimbursement. These two funding sources are critical for tribal clinic sustainability.

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