

Successfully treated, never hurt

Dr. Katie Townsend gladly treats patients with disabilities. But even she wishes she were better able to support more of them, as she occasionally encounters something outside her experience. Once she needed a patient's seven-year-old daughter to interpret for her father, who was deaf and nonverbal. If she hadn't been there, Townsend says, "I wouldn't have known what to do or even where to send him."

Mike Papili, a self-advocate who is deaf, wishes there were more dentists like Townsend in Delaware who either cater to or are skilled in treating people with disabilities. While he's mainly seen a trusted dentist since childhood, he also had a dentist who tried to bill him for an ASL interpreter. "Some are rude and disrespectful," he says. "Some are nice, but not fully understanding. There needs to be more education."

Townsend and Papili are two voices in a rising chorus expressing alarm at the limited access to quality oral care for people with disabilities. In 2015, a [CDS report on health disparities](#) found how deep the problem goes: 41 percent of Delawareans with disabilities reported either never having seen a dentist or having had their last visit more than a year earlier. Such limited access can have serious implications, as poor oral health may contribute not only to oral diseases but chronic conditions including diabetes and heart disease, explains [Jae Chul Lee](#), the director of CDS's Health and Wellness unit. That's why, in 2016, Lee designed and conducted surveys for [people with disabilities](#) and [oral health professionals](#).

Lee hopes the survey results spark action on many different fronts, including legislative advocacy and health promotion within the disability community. (CDS's surveys also addressed issues including Medicaid coverage, office accessibility, communication and sedation.) Lee also expects the surveys will help "guide the development of cultural competency training."

The more training, the better, says Townsend. "I want patients to be successfully treated," she says, "never hurt."



Oral health surveys from CDS could lead to more dentists like Katie Townsend (pictured), who readily treats people with disabilities.