Problem Statement
Applying fluoride varnish to the teeth of young children is proven to reduce dental disease, but too few children in New York are receiving treatments. Fluoride varnish application is a standard of care for pediatric offices and for New York Medicaid.\(^1\),\(^2\) Allowing additional types of health providers to perform this service would bring New York in line with other states and create a wider array of access points at which children and adolescents can receive this critical preventive service. Amending New York State Education Law is the only method of allowing providers or parents to perform this task.

Background
Dental disease in children has been called a “hidden epidemic.” Hidden because dental disease is not always apparent until the pain becomes unendurable or until it creates an inability to eat, sleep, or concentrate in school. It is also hidden by poverty. Most children won't experience severe dental disease. Instead, the effects are felt primarily by low-income children because it relates to many of the same social and economic factors that drive other health disparities. The good news is that tooth decay is largely preventable. Investing in the prevention of tooth decay is a smart public investment in children's health and development today and for the future.

In 2021, more than 14% of children in New York reported one or more oral health problems.\(^3\) In 2020, only one in every three New York children enrolled in Medicaid (32.8%) received a preventive dental visit (national median 41.5%) which includes fluoride varnish application.\(^4\)

Persistent oral health disparities remain, with children who are Black and Hispanic/Latino and children experiencing poverty most-affected by poor dental health. According to a national report, about one in four children living in poverty had untreated cavities.\(^5\)

Fluoride Varnish: Easy, Effective Prevention Strategy that is Underutilized in New York
Fluoride varnish is a topical solution used to prevent tooth decay. Like fluoridated toothpaste, fluoride varnish is used on the surface of teeth and helps prevent cavities by making the tooth hard and helps prevent cavities when they are just starting or barely visible.

Fluoride varnish is painted onto the front and back, top and bottom of the teeth with a tiny brush where it hardens as soon as it is touched by saliva in the mouth. It takes less than two minutes to apply and requires no special equipment or extensive training to master the technique.

The US Preventive Services Task Force recommends that primary care clinicians apply fluoride varnish to the primary teeth of all infants and children starting at first tooth eruption.\(^7\)
There is high-quality evidence that fluoride varnish is effective in preventing tooth decay in children at moderate to high risk for decay. In fact, studies show that children who receive fluoride varnish every three months have fewer cavities than those who get it less often or not at all. Fluoride varnish should be started early, even in infancy, when the first tooth erupts, because it is most effective when applied before tooth decay develops. New York Medicaid reimburses for up to four applications per child per year: dental providers can bill from birth up to age 21 and medical providers from birth to age 6.

Providers currently authorized to apply fluoride varnish in New York:
- Dentists
- Dental hygienists
- Physicians
- Nurse Practitioners
- Registered Nurses
- Physician Assistants

**Opportunity to Expand Availability**

Several projects in New York are seeking to increase the number of children receiving fluoride varnish by educating primary care offices on the importance of the service, providing training on application and technical assistance on incorporating the service into well-child visits. Allowing additional members of care teams to apply the varnish would increase flexibility in offices and provide more opportunities to incorporate the service into visits. Many other states allow a wider variety of health professionals to perform this task.

During the COVID pandemic many children did not receive routine preventive dental care. Because of this, Nevada began pilot programs...
allowing parents and caregivers to apply fluoride varnish under the supervision of a dental professional during a tele-health visit after the child has been seen by a dentist. California allows anyone working in a public health setting to apply fluoride varnish with a prescription and protocol established by a dentist or physician. All dental and medical professionals, as well as non-healthcare individuals such as teachers, parents, Promotoras, and community health workers can apply varnish. Since the product is more effective when it is applied frequently, the strategy of expanding who can apply fluoride varnish removes some of the main barriers to visits: time and transportation.

Under NYS Education Law, medical professionals are not able to delegate a service (such a fluoride varnish application) so someone who is not authorized to perform that service. A change to the law authorizing a parent to apply the fluoride varnish allows the medical professional to delegate that task to the parent.

Proposal
1. New York should amend Title 8 of the Education Law to allow the following providers to apply fluoride varnish:
   - Registered Dental Assistant
   - Licensed Practical Nurse
   - Midwife

2. New York should amend state law to allow unlicensed members of health care teams, such as medical assistants, doulas, and community health workers to provide fluoride varnish. Parents/caregivers should also be allowed to provide fluoride varnish under supervision.

3. Nothing in the proposal would change reimbursement policies for New York State Medicaid or allow application of fluoride varnish without a prescription.

Conclusion
Allowing additional providers to apply fluoride varnish will increase opportunities for children to receive this important preventive service. The professions proposed will bring New York in line with other states in the administration of fluoride varnish. Amending state law is the only way to allow additional providers and parents to perform this task.

Endnotes
4 Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services. Percentage of Eligibles Who Received Preventive Dental Services: Ages 1 to 20, FFY 2020. Percentage of Eligibles Who Received Preventive Dental Services: Ages 1 to 20 | Medicaid
6 New York State Medicaid. Personal communications, April 2023.