

February 9, 2021

The Honorable Richard Durbin
Majority Whip
United States Senate
711 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Marco Rubio
United States Senate
284 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Whip Durbin and Senator Rubio:

On behalf of our physician and medical student members, the American Medical Association (AMA) is writing to voice our support for S. 54, the “Strengthening America’s Health Care Readiness Act.” This much needed legislation would provide additional funding for the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), the Nurse Corps, and establish a National Health Service Corps Emergency Service demonstration project. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for additional emergency capacities and underscored the health workforce shortages and disparities that exist throughout the nation. This bill would bring access to care for patients and welcome relief to the physicians, residents, and nurses who have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic caring for our sickest patients.

A Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSAs) is used to identify areas, populations, groups, or facilities within the United States that are experiencing a shortage of health care professionals. The NHSC offers scholarship and loan repayment awards to primary care health professionals in exchange for practicing in these HPSAs. The NHSC is widely recognized as a success on many fronts and has improved access to health care for rural and urban underserved Americans, increased state investments in recruiting and retaining health professionals, provided incentives for practitioners to enter primary care, reduced the financial burden that the cost of health professions education places on new practitioners, and helped ensure access to health professions education for students from all backgrounds.

Notwithstanding the NHSC’s success, demand for health professionals across the country continues to grow. With more than 16,000 physicians in the NHSC caring for more than 17 million patients,¹ and more than 1,900 nurses in the Nurse Corps caring for more than 1.9 million people,² the NHSC and Nurse Corps still fall far short of fulfilling the health care needs of all HPSAs. The Health Resources and Service Administration estimates that an additional 32,494 physicians are required to eliminate all current primary care, dental, and mental health HPSAs.³ Moreover, nationwide there is projected to be a shortage of 139,000 physicians by 2033 with a projected primary care physician shortage of between 21,400 and

¹ <https://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about-us>.

² <https://data.hrsa.gov/data/fact-sheets>.

³ <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>.

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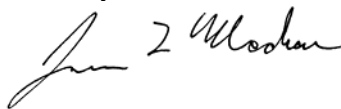
55,200.⁴ With the current and projected physician shortage, and the increased demands that have been placed on all health care providers, physicians and nurses alike, during the pandemic, additional support for these programs with a proven track record of success in our urban and rural areas of the country is desperately needed.

Moreover, this legislation will help to build a more effective and diverse pipeline for future healthcare providers by incorporating a 40 percent set-aside for members of groups that are historically underrepresented in health care professions, including racial and ethnic minorities and individuals from low-income urban and rural communities. In general, reducing medical student indebtedness promotes diversity within medicine and may contribute to a reduction in the shortage of physicians and nurses in primary care as well as other undersupplied specialties. Medical education remains the most expensive post-secondary education in the United States. In 2019, 73 percent of physicians graduated with a median debt of \$200,000.⁵ According to surveys of the Association of American Medical Colleges, underrepresented minorities cited cost of attendance as the top deterrent to applying to medical school.⁶ With recent health reforms seeking to eliminate health care disparities amongst the U.S. population, increasing the number of historically underrepresented physicians and nurses is important to ensure a health care workforce more reflective of the general population.

As the nation faces a pandemic and multiple health professional shortages, sustained, long-term investments in workforce programs are necessary to help care for our nation's most vulnerable populations. This vital legislation will help to sustain the current workforce during the pandemic and help maintain a robust pipeline of providers for future health emergencies. As such, the AMA urges the Senate to pass S. 54, the "Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act," thereby providing a much needed investment in our current and future health care workforce.

The AMA appreciates your leadership on this important issue, and we look forward to working with you to advance this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim L. Madara". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

James L. Madara, MD

⁴ AAMC (2020, June) The Complexities of Supply and Demand: Projections from 2018 to 2033. Retrieved from AAMC: <https://www.aamc.org/system/files/2020-06/stratcomm-aamc-physician-workforce-projections-june-2020.pdf>.

⁵ <https://store.aamc.org/physician-education-debt-and-the-cost-to-attend-medical-school-2020-update.html>.

⁶ Grayson, M. S., Newton, D. A. and Thompson, L. F. (2012), Payback time: the associations of debt and income with medical student career choice. *Medical Education*, 46: 983–991.