

April 8, 2021

The Honorable Marsha Blackburn  
United States Senate  
357 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senate  
522 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dick Durbin  
United States Senate  
711 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tina Smith  
United States Senate  
720 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Support for S. 924, Rural America Health Corps Act

Dear Senators Blackburn, Durbin, Murkowski, and Smith:

On behalf of our physician and medical student members, the American Medical Association (AMA) is writing to voice our support for S. 924, the “Rural America Health Corps Act.” This much-needed legislation would establish a demonstration program to provide payments on qualified loans for individuals eligible for but not currently participating in the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Loan Repayment Program who agree to a five-year period of obligated full-time service in a rural health professional shortage area. Notwithstanding the NHSC’s success, demand for health professionals across rural communities continues to grow. This legislation would supplement the NHSC and provide additional pathways for physicians to reduce their student debt burden while practicing in underserved rural communities.

Nationwide, we have seen shortfalls in our health workforce capacity, especially in rural areas, where there is an inadequate number of providers to sufficiently meet the needs of the communities. With more than 16,000 physicians in the NHSC caring for more than 17 million patients,<sup>1</sup> the NHSC still falls far short of fulfilling the health care needs of all rural areas. Of the more than 7,200 federally designated health professional shortage areas (HPSA), more than half are in rural regions.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, while 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural communities, only 11 percent of physicians practice in such areas.<sup>3</sup>

Nationwide there is projected to be a shortage of 139,000 physicians by 2033,<sup>4</sup> and with our aging physician workforce it is projected that there will be about a quarter fewer rural physicians practicing by 2030.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, physicians who are most likely to practice in rural regions, such as those graduating

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about-us>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/attracting-next-generation-physicians-rural-medicine>.

<sup>4</sup> 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-june2020.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1900808>.

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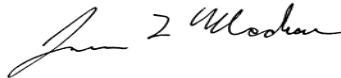
from medical schools in rural areas, declined by 28 percent between 2002 and 2017.<sup>6</sup> This decrease is compounded by the fact that in 2016 and 2017 only 4.3 percent of incoming medical students were from rural backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

In general, reducing medical student indebtedness promotes diversity within medicine and may contribute to a reduction in the shortage of physicians. 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.<sup>8</sup> Since rural residencies and practices are perceived to be less prestigious, offer fewer opportunities, and provide lower pay, it is imperative that there are programs, such as the one proposed in the Rural American Health Corps Act, that encourage young physicians to practice in underserved rural areas. By providing loan repayment in exchange for service this pilot program will help reduce the growing rural care gap and provide physicians with the ability to reduce their debt burden while integrating into, and caring for, a community that desperately needs their expertise.

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. The "Rural America Health Corps Act" would help strengthen the pipeline of providers for rural communities. As such, the AMA urges the Senate to pass this vital legislation.

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

Sincerely,



James L. Madara, MD

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.00924>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/attracting-next-generation-physicians-rural-medicine>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://store.aamc.org/physician-education-debt-and-the-cost-to-attend-medical-school-2020-update.html>.