

June 23, 2022

The Honorable Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senate
713 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker
U.S. Senate
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Rosen and Wicker:

On behalf of our physician and medical student members, the American Medical Association (AMA) is writing in support of S. 4330, the “Specialty Physicians Advancing Rural Care Act,” or the “SPARC Act,” which would amend the Public Health Service Act to authorize a loan repayment program to encourage specialty medicine physicians to serve in rural communities experiencing a shortage of specialty medicine physicians.

There is an expected physician shortage of about 139,000 physicians by 2033, with between 33,700 and 86,700 of that shortage being nonprimary care specialty physicians.¹ This is particularly alarming since it is projected that there will be about a quarter fewer rural physicians practicing by 2030.² Moreover, physicians who are most likely to practice in rural regions, such as those graduating from medical schools in rural areas, declined by 28 percent between 2002 and 2017.³ This decrease is compounded by the fact that, in 2016 and 2017, only 4.3 percent of incoming medical students were from rural backgrounds.⁴

In general, reducing medical student indebtedness promotes diversity within medicine and may contribute to a reduction in the shortage of specialty 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 \$200,000.⁵ 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 SPARC Act, that encourage young physicians to practice in underserved rural areas.

The SPARC Act would create a loan repayment program for specialty medicine physicians and non-physician specialty health care providers who agree to complete six years of full-time obligated service in a rural community experiencing a shortage of specialty medicine physicians. In exchange for this service, these health care providers would receive forgiveness of one-sixth of their eligible outstanding loans each year, and for completion of the sixth and final year of service, the remainder of any eligible loans will be paid off up to \$250,000. By providing loan repayment in exchange for service, this bill would 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.

¹ <https://www.aamc.org/system/files/2020-06/stratcomm-aamc-physician-workforce-projections-june-2020.pdf>.

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1900808>.

³ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.00924>.

⁴ <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/attracting-next-generation-physicians-rural-medicine>.

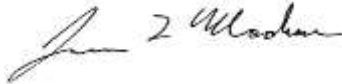
⁵ <https://store.aamc.org/physician-education-debt-and-the-cost-to-attend-medical-school-2020-update.html>.

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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 SPARC Act would help strengthen the pipeline of providers for rural communities. As such, the AMA urges the passage of this vital legislation.

The AMA commends your ongoing commitment to this important issue and we look forward to working with you to further advance this legislation in the 117th Congress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James L. Madara".

James L. Madara, MD