



Minnesota Hospital Association

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March 20, 2023

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
Chair, Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor, and Pensions  
U.S. Senate  
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy  
Ranking Member, Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor, and Pensions  
U.S. Senate  
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

**Subject: Health Care Workforce Shortage**

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy,

On behalf of our member hospitals and health systems, the Minnesota Hospital Association (MHA) appreciates the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) committee's commitment to developing solutions to address the health care workforce crisis.

Nearly one in four total job vacancies in Minnesota are currently in health care, totaling over 52,000 vacant positions. As you know, our state's health care workforce shortage mirrors a nationwide trend, exacerbated by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic which placed extreme stress on health care professionals. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) documented in a 2022 health care workforce survey that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, health care job vacancies are increasing significantly, with the largest increases in mental health and substance abuse counseling. The share of all health care providers that indicate they are planning to leave their jobs in the next five years has also increased significantly, specifically in rural areas, partly due to retirement and burnout. Research from Minnesota's Hennepin Healthcare Institute for Professional Worklife team suggests that staffing shortages are likely due to not feeling valued, lack of support and resources, and work overload.

Given the shortage of health care workers in Minnesota, hospitals and health systems have had to seek available workers from temporary staffing agencies more frequently. However, the competition among states for these temporary workers created supply challenges and unsustainable cost inflation, making it difficult for many hospitals and health systems to get the help needed to serve patients. Additionally, more health care professionals are opting for a part-time work schedule, with recent MHA survey data showing for the first time more than half (57%) of registered nurses are not working full-time. While emergency federal funding was helpful in supporting immediate needs over the past few years, comprehensive policy reform is needed to support recruitment and retention and attract a new generation of health care professionals.

To address this complex challenge facing the United States, the Senate HELP committee should explore the following legislative solutions:

- **Additional funding for federal workforce development and education programs**

Congress has recently increased investments in the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) title VII and VIII workforce programs, and long-term support will be vital to addressing persistent workforce shortages. These programs include:

- National Health Service Corps
- Nurse Corps Loan Repayment Program
- Nurse Corps Scholarship Program
- Faculty Loan Repayment Program
- Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development programs
- Primary Care Medicine, Pediatric Subspecialty Loan Repayment, and Oral Health Training
- Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training Program
- Mental and Substance Use Disorders Workforce Training Demonstration Program
- Graduate Psychology Education Program

To better maximize impact on the health care workforce shortage, some of these HRSA programs could be expanded to allied professionals, who serve as an essential part of hospital and health system's care capacity. These programs should also be flexible in accommodating changes due to unforeseen circumstances so that participants are not subject to unfair penalties and remain committed to working in health care.

The health care workforce shortage cannot be appropriately mitigated unless higher education institutions have the capacity to provide the necessary training. Congress could also invest in medical education by providing federal grants to health care training programs to increase recruitment and retention of diverse student and faculty populations. Specifically, nursing programs should incorporate more flexibilities for nursing educator educational requirements and incorporate more practical training. The grants could also be used to improve curriculum, modernize technology infrastructure, and expand clinical education sites.

- **Additional graduate medical education and children's graduate medical education positions**

In 2020 and 2022, Congress increased the number of graduate medical education positions by 1,000 and 200 respectively. While these additional positions are much appreciated, they are the only increases in the past 25 years, and much more is needed to help address the physician workforce shortage. In addition, children's hospitals graduate medical education, a separate discretionary grant program administered by HRSA, requires additional investment. This program is especially important as Minnesota faces provider shortages due to increased demand for children's mental health services and the recent impact of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and other respiratory viruses on children.

- **Immigration visa process improvements for health care professionals**

Foreign-trained health professionals and their immediate family members need immigrant visa flexibilities and more streamlined pathways to attain permanent resident

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status. This became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when many health care workers faced travel bans, embassy closures, and visa processing delays. In addition, hospitals and health systems have increasingly relied on international recruitment for health care positions and should not face unnecessary bureaucratic paperwork requirements when facilitating newly hired employees from other countries.

- **Increased flexibilities for employer education benefits**

Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code currently allows employers to provide tax-free benefits of up to \$5,250 per year to eligible employees for qualified educational expenses. Legislation has been introduced in the past to increase this tax exemption, which could better incentivize employers and employees to take advantage of the educational benefit. Especially given the high cost of many health care educational programs, an expanded benefit could be an effective retention tool for upskilling and health care career advancement.

- **Legal protections from assault and intimidation for health care professionals**

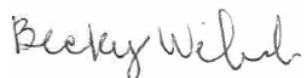
Policy solutions to improve workplace safety for all health care team members could include enacting federal protections for health care workers against violence and intimidation. Congress could also provide federal grants to hospitals for violence prevention training programs, mental health support for employees, coordination efforts with state and local law enforcement, and physical plant improvements to strengthen security measures.

- **Reductions in administrative burden and clinical workload overload**

Our members are increasingly diverted from clinical health care duties to respond to a proliferation of federal quality measures. While much of this is good and important, there are also trade-offs as the number of measures and reporting requirements rise. Congress should work with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to ensure streamlined and meaningful administrative reporting requirements. Congress should also consider permanent telehealth flexibilities, which have allowed for health care professionals to treat additional patients more efficiently.

MHA greatly appreciates your attention to this important issue affecting patient care, and many of our members who are doing research and pilot programs on this topic are available to discuss further. As you work to develop legislation to address the health care workforce shortage, please feel free to contact me at [bwifstrand@mnhospitals.org](mailto:bwifstrand@mnhospitals.org).

Sincerely,



Becky Wifstrand  
Director of Federal Policy and Regulatory Affairs

CC: The Honorable Tina Smith  
The Honorable Amy Klobuchar