



May 2, 2024

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chair
Senate Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions Committee
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions Committee
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Senate HELP Committee Hearing, “What Can Congress Do to Address the Severe Shortage of Minority Health Care Professionals and the Maternal Health Crisis?”

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of our respective associations representing providers specializing in occupational therapy, physical therapy, respiratory therapy, audiology, and speech-language pathology, we respectfully submit the following comments in advance of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee’s hearing on May 2nd, titled “What Can Congress Do to Address the Severe Shortage of Minority Health Care Professionals and the Maternal Health Crisis?”

As the HELP Committee reviews proposals to increase the number of healthcare providers, especially those in underrepresented demographics and residing in medically underserved areas, we urge the Committee to consider legislation to fund and bolster the Allied Health Workforce Diversity (AHWD) Program. This program, enacted into law in late 2022 as part of the PREVENT Pandemics Act and included in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, aims to provide increased educational opportunities to minority students who are currently underrepresented in our professions. Under the AHWD program, the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) can authorize scholarships and stipends to accredited higher education programs to recruit qualified individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, including persons with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and racial and ethnic minorities.

However, although Congress authorized the AHWD program, no appropriations have yet to be approved for it to become operational. To address this issue and generally provide much needed additional resources to the healthcare workforce, Sen. Casey recently introduced the Long-Term Care Workforce Support Act (S. 4120) which already has the support of 26 Senators and 50 healthcare associations. Among other items, the bill would ensure that the AHWD program would be provided with five years of funding at \$10 million per year.

Supporting the implementation and funding of the AHWD program will help strengthen and expand the comprehensive use of evidence-based strategies shown to increase the recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation of students from underrepresented backgrounds. These strategies include outreach to the community, creating or expanding mentorship and tutoring programs, and providing scholarships and stipends to students. The health care workforce is facing significant stresses, and the need to boost recruitment is critical now more than ever to improve access to high-quality care for medically underserved populations and increase the number of minorities as healthcare professionals.

Policy Recommendation

We urge Congress to pass S. 4120 and provide the AHWD program with the necessary resources for its implementation. This will help to recruit, retain, and further develop the healthcare workforce to address provider shortages – notably in the areas that need it the most. While these shortages are felt in many areas, it is especially dire in rural and medically underserved regions. This program will provide expanded resources to minority populations to facilitate their entry into healthcare provider training and education. We appreciate the opportunity to share our views and policy recommendation on this issue. If you have any questions, please contact Steve Kline at the American Physical Therapy Association at stevekline@apta.org

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Audiology

American Association for Respiratory Care

American Occupational Therapy Association

American Physical Therapy Association

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

National Rural Health Association