

August 28, 2020

The Honorable Dick Durbin
U.S. Senate
711 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Marco Rubio
U.S. Senate
284 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Durbin and Rubio:

On behalf of our 163,000 dentist members, the American Dental Association (ADA) would like to thank you for introducing the Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act (S.4055). As you know, this bill addresses the health workforce shortages and disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic through additional funding for the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), as well as the establishment of a NHSC Emergency Service demonstration project. This historic investment in the NHSC and National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) will bolster health emergency surge capacity and restore the pipeline of dentists and other health care providers needed to address existing health workforce shortages.

The ADA is committed to working to expand the availability of NHSC scholarships and loan repayments for dentists who agree to work in a NHSC-approved site. Expansion of these NHSC programs would not only address existing health workforce shortages throughout the country, but would also tackle the issue of student loan indebtedness. Student debt associated with graduate dental education is a substantial barrier in meeting our nation's oral health workforce needs. The burden of paying off student loans, which can average more than \$200,000, has driven dentists toward higher-paying specialties and communities, leaving many areas with gaps in availability of dental services and access to oral health care. Your bill would address these challenges and encourage dentists and promising dental students to practice in underserved areas by providing loan repayment and scholarships in exchange for a service commitment. The legislation would also give priority to individuals who continue to practice after their fulfillment of obligated service and provide increased funding amounts based upon the site where the provider completed their NHSC contractual duties.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the alarming racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes, which is a manifestation of our nation's health workforce shortages in underserved urban and rural communities. These inequities could be addressed by expanding the representation of minority populations in health careers. The bill's inclusion of the forty percent in set-aside funding for racial and ethnic minorities and students from low-income urban and rural areas will address existing inequalities and reduce disparities and barriers to entry into the dental profession.

Lastly, the legislation would create a new Emergency Service partnership between the NHSC and NDMS to boost America's health care surge capacity in response to public

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health emergencies. Dentists serving in the NHSC or alumni who continue to practice in a health professional shortage area could concurrently serve in the NDMS and be available for rapid deployment for health emergencies, while receiving supplemental loan repayment awards to address their student debt. For years, the ADA has advocated for national emergency preparedness solutions through research, public policy, and legislation, and the Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act would help with these efforts.

Again, the ADA thanks you for introducing S. 4055 and for your leadership on these issues. If you have any questions, please contact Jennifer Fisher at fisherj@ada.org.

Sincerely,

Chad P. Gehani, D.D.S.
President

Kathleen T. O'Loughlin, D.M.D., M.P.H.
Executive Director

CPG:KTO:rm