

February 22, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Office of the Speaker of the House of Representatives
The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Majority Leader
H-107, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, and Majority Leader Hoyer:

On behalf of our 162,000 dentist members, the American Dental Association (ADA) writes to ask that you renew efforts to address difficulties with the recruitment and retention of allied dental professionals as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. To work towards this goal, we respectfully urge you to increase the authorized funding level for the Oral Health Workforce Development Program (42 U.S.C. 256g), which is part of the Public Health Act. We also write to thank the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions for holding its recent hearing, "Recruiting, Revitalizing & Diversifying: Examining the Health Care Workforce Shortage," which helpfully illuminated health care workforce issues and solutions.

The majority of dental practices are small businesses. While assistance to dentists made available by Congress allowed many dental practices to rebound in 2021, the continued challenges of the ongoing pandemic have led to increasing worries among dentists that their practices, and dentistry in general, will not fully recover in 2022. In a recent survey by ADA's Health Policy Institute (HPI), nearly 16% of general dentists expressed skepticism about the recovery of their practice. The survey also showed that the volume of total collections from patients has dropped during the outbreak of the delta variant of SARS-CoV-2. Perhaps most importantly, HPI found that in August 2021, 90% of dentist owners reported that, compared to before the pandemic, it is extremely or very challenging to recruit dental hygienists, and

85% of dentist owners are finding it extremely or very challenging to fill dental assistant positions when compared to before the pandemic.¹

These difficulties in the recruitment and retention of dental workforce threaten both the health of dental practices and the health of American patients who rely on an adequate dental workforce for access to oral health care. In fact, 40% of dentist owners said that vacancies in their offices are limiting their practice's ability to see more patients.

Grants like the Grants to States to Support Oral Health Workforce Activities program authorized under 42 U.S.C. 256g are crucial to efforts to meet dental workforce needs according to each state's individual needs. State-based programs can provide immediate solutions to recruitment and retention problems in the dental workforce brought about by the COVID-19 public health emergency. These programs are able to provide assistance that is targeted to areas and populations where recruitment and retention is especially difficult, and are well suited to take advantage of local knowledge that can be used in recruitment and retention efforts.

ADA also urges that you consider student loan reform to improve recruitment and retention of the dentist workforce. In 2019, most dental school seniors (82.4 percent)² graduated with educational loans averaging \$292,169³ (\$261,305 for public dental schools and \$321,184 for private dental schools), and federal student loan interest rates of up to 10.5% begin accruing immediately. Student loan debt has contributed to an extremely or very challenging environment to recruit dentists, as reported by 63% of dentist owners.⁴ Addressing the financial challenge of student debt may also incentivize oral health care professionals to work in, and stay in, areas in desperate need of oral health care.

The nation's dentists greatly appreciate the support Congress has already provided, and is grateful for your continued support of the dental profession during these trying times. We

¹ [Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Dental Practices](#). Retrieved January 19, 2022.

² American Dental Education Association. (March 2020). ADEA Survey of Dental School Seniors, 2019 Graduating Class Tables Report. Washington, DC. (Table 16. How Respondents Funded Their Dental School Education).

³ American Dental Education Association. (March 2020). ADEA Survey of Dental School Seniors, 2019 Graduating Class Tables Report. Washington, DC. (Table 19. Average Amount of Educational Debt* of Graduating Dental Students by All Schools Combined and by Type of School, 1990 and 1996-2019).

⁴ [Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Dental Practices](#). Retrieved January 19, 2022.

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look forward to working with you to address oral health workforce shortages both during the current emergency when problems are so acute, and in the future as we seek to ensure dental practices are able to sustain and expand patients' access to oral health care. We also respectfully request a meeting with you to discuss problems in the oral health care workforce, including recruitment and retention.

Please contact Jennifer Fisher at fisherj@ada.org or (202)789-5160 with any questions about how you can continue to support dental practices during the COVID-19 emergency.

Sincerely,

/s/

Cesar R. Sabates, D.D.S.
President

/s/

Raymond A. Cohlma, D.D.S.
Executive Director

CRS:RAC:jf