

March 28, 2023

The Honorable Marsha Blackburn
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Durbin
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Shelly Moore Capito
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tina Smith
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jacky Rosen
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Blackburn, Durbin, Capito, Smith, Murkowski and Rosen:

On behalf of our nearly 5,000 member hospitals, health systems and other health care organizations, our clinician partners — including more than 270,000 affiliated physicians, 2 million nurses and other caregivers — and the 43,000 health care leaders who belong to our professional membership groups, the American Hospital Association (AHA) writes to express support for the Rural America Health Corps Act (S.940).

A qualified, engaged and diverse workforce is at the heart of America's health care system. However, long building structural changes within the health care workforce, combined with the profound toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, have left hospitals and health systems facing a national staffing emergency that could jeopardize access to high-quality, equitable care for patients and the communities they serve.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals were already facing significant challenges that were making it difficult to sustain, build and retain the health care workforce. In 2017, the majority of our nursing workforce was close to retirement, with more than half aged 50 and older, and almost 30% aged 60 and older. Yet, nursing schools had to turn away over 90,000 qualified applicants in 2021, according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, due to lack of faculty and training sites. Hospitals faced similar demographic trends for physicians, with data from the Association of American Medical Colleges indicating that one-third of practicing physicians will reach retirement age over the next decade. Hospitals also were reporting significant shortages of allied health and behavioral health professionals.

The result of these mounting pressures on the health care workforce has created a historic workforce crisis complete with real-time short-term staffing shortages and a daunting long-range picture of an unfulfilled talent pipeline. Just within the week of March 9, Department of Health



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Page 2 of 2

and Human Services (HHS) data showed that 601 hospitals (or 16.3% of reporting hospitals) anticipated a critical staffing shortage. In addition, projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics [estimate](#) U.S. health care organizations will have to fill more than 203,000 open nursing positions every year until 2031. There also are significant projected shortages of [physicians](#) and allied health and behavioral health care [providers](#), which will likely be felt even more strongly in areas serving structurally marginalized urban and rural communities. This also has resulted in a 20.8% increase in total labor expenses from 2019 to 2022, according to Syntellis Performance Solutions 2023 CFO Outlook for Healthcare.¹

Health care workforce needs are particularly acute in rural areas. Recruitment and retention of health care professionals is an ongoing challenge and expense for rural hospitals. More than 60% of the health professional shortage areas (HPSA) are located in rural or partially rural areas.

Your Rural America Health Corps Act aims to reduce the shortage of medical providers in rural areas. This bipartisan legislation is well-designed to address these issues by establishing a Rural America Health Corps, modeled closely on the National Health Service Corps, to encourage health care professionals to serve in rural areas. It will provide incentives for clinicians to practice in rural areas and will help increase the supply of health care professionals at a critical time for our nation's health care workforce. The legislation would, among other provisions, authorize a Rural Provider Loan Repayment Demonstration Program in which participants would agree to serve full-time for five years in an HPSA that also is rural. Those who serve in this capacity would be eligible for \$200,000 in loan repayments.

We thank you for your leadership on behalf of the nation's health care workforce, and look forward to working with you to enact this important legislation.

Sincerely,

/s/

Lisa Kidder Hrobsky
Senior Vice President
Advocacy and Political Affairs

¹ <https://www.syntellis.com/resources/report/cfo-outlook-healthcare>