

September 7, 2021

Submitted electronically

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chair
U.S. House of Representatives Energy and
Commerce Committee
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rogers, Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce
Committee
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Anna G. Eshoo, Chair
U.S. House of Representatives Energy and
Commerce Subcommittee on Health
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brett Guthrie, Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Health
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairs Pallone and Eshoo, and Ranking Members McMorris Rogers and Guthrie,

We, the undersigned organizations, voice our strong support for the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3320) introduced by Rep. Bobby Rush and Rep. Markwayne Mullin, and urge the committee to consider this bill when Congress returns from recess. We also wish to thank Ranking Member McMorris Rogers for serving as the lead Republican on this bill in the 116th Congress, where the inclusion of its language in the EMPOWER for Health Act was unanimously approved by the committee.

The professions included in H.R. 3320 are playing a crucial role in the nation's response to, and recovery from, the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation would create a workforce program administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to help promote diversity in the professions of audiology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, and speech-language pathology, helping ensure the workforce reflects the country's diversity.

The ongoing public health crisis due to COVID-19 poses challenges in both treatment and immediate care, as well as long-term recovery. Allied health professions including audiology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, and speech-language pathology are well positioned to assist with both the immediate care and long-term recovery and rehabilitation of those affected by COVID-19. Diversifying this workforce will help better enable these health care professionals to meet the current and future needs of the populations impacted by COVID-19.

Allied health professions play a crucial role in recovery from COVID-19 infections, as well as treatment of the effects of "Post-Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection," (PASCⁱ), often self-described as "long-haulers" or "long-COVID." Issue 13 of *The Exchange*, a publication of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) in the Department of Health and Human Services, entitled *The Work of Hospital Allied and Supportive Care Providers During COVID-19*, explores the actions by

allied health practitioners to combat and rehabilitate during a nationwide pandemic. The articles illustrate how physical, respiratory, and occupational therapists assisted in ensuring patient comfort and recovery.

As Congress works to prepare our nation for the post-pandemic recovery, we must anticipate what is required for a thriving and diverse health workforce to address the long-term effects of the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes an increased “risk for severe COVID-19 illnesses and death for many people in racial and ethnic minority groups.”ⁱⁱ The future health workforce must evolve to mirror the makeup of the population.

- Patients who receive care from members of their own racial and ethnic background tend to have better outcomes,ⁱⁱⁱ
- Health professionals from underrepresented and minority backgrounds are more likely to practice in medically underserved areas, and^{iv}
- Minority groups disproportionately live in areas with provider shortages.^v

Solving the diversity gap in our nation’s health systems requires a comprehensive response. One step Congress can take now is to authorize a workforce development program for allied health professionals. The program created by H.R. 3320 is modeled after the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Diversity program, which has successfully increased the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities pursuing careers in nursing since its creation in 1998. This new program would help strengthen and expand the comprehensive use of evidence-based strategies shown to increase the recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds for the professions of audiology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, and speech-language pathology.

We appreciate all the work of the committee to draw attention to all aspects of COVID treatment and recovery. We stand ready to serve as a resource, and provide any additional information you need, as well as to collaborate on any efforts in this area. Please contact Abe Saffer at asaffer@aota.org or 202-450-8068 if you have questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Audiology
American Association for Respiratory Care
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Physical Therapy Association
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

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ⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/02/24/covid-19-long-haulers-fauci-announces-launch-nationwide-initiative/4572768001/> viewed March 4, 2021

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review, Interpretive Summary for April 2, 2021. Accessed April 4, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute of Medicine. (2004). In the nation’s compelling interest: Ensuring diversity in the health care workforce. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

^{iv} Cooper-Patrick, L., Gallo, J. J., Gonzales, J. J., Vu, H. T., Powe, N. R., Nelson, C., & Ford, D. E. (1999). Race, gender, and partnership in the patient-physician relationship. *JAMA*, 282, 583–589.

^v Reyes-Akinbileje, B. (2008, February 7). Title VII health professions education and training: Issues in reauthorization. Washington, DC: U.S. Congressional Research Service.