



May 12, 2021

Dear Representative/Senator,

As the member organizations of the Federation of Associations of Schools of the Health Professions (FASHP), we are writing to welcome you to the 117th Congress.

FASHP was created in 1968 as a forum for representatives of health professions education institutions to address education's role in organizational patterns of health care; to encourage effective collaboration among the professions in education and practice; to prepare health professions education for the future; and to serve as a liaison with other organizations sharing an interest in health professions education. FASHP comprises 18 associations representing a health professions education community that includes 7,429 programs, institutions, hospitals, and health systems, and more than 1.3 million students, faculty, clinicians, administrators, residents, and researchers.

FASHP looks forward to collaborating with you on policies that strengthen and promote the professional health care workforce and the vital role education plays in supplying the nation with highly trained health care and public health professionals. As Congress continues its work, our member organizations stand ready to work with you to promote policies that bolster the nation's health care workforce and ensure that Americans have access to high-quality health care services.

As we continue to confront today's public health emergencies, such as COVID-19, and prepare for tomorrow, we are highly concerned that, at a time when the importance of a well-trained health care and public health workforce has become urgently critical, the disruption by the pandemic will threaten the ability of some of our programs to prepare the future health care workforce and impede the ability to send recent graduates into the workforce in a timely manner. In particular, the pandemic has unveiled unique challenges for some health professions schools and students, including hurdles to pursuing and the elimination of certain clinical training opportunities, delayed testing and graduations, and challenges in accessing federal student aid to continue training. As Congress continues to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as we work to modernize public health infrastructure, we respectfully urge you to consider the unique economic and education needs of the nation's health professions schools and students. Specifically, FASHP urges the inclusion of provisions addressing health professions students and schools, the prioritization and protection of our students and health care workforce's mental health, and the incorporation of student loan forgiveness for health professionals in any legislative package.

Health professionals dedicate their careers to keeping people healthy, but too often they do not receive the care they need to address their own well-being, including for their mental health. Those working on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic are putting their own health and safety, as well as that of their family members, at risk to provide critically needed care. Even before the pandemic, data showed that a large proportion of health professions have experienced higher levels of stress and trauma, with more than half of physicians, over 40 percent of nurses, and one in three of all health professionals experiencing symptoms of

burnout.[1] [2] Preliminary studies already find that COVID-19 is having significant negative impacts on their mental health, including increased depression, anxiety, and insomnia[3], which can also lead to posttraumatic stress disorder.[4] In addition to their detrimental effect on health professionals and their families, burnout, stress, and other behavioral health issues negatively affect patient care, patient experience, and overall health outcomes.

Furthermore, the pandemic has increased the mental health concerns of college students, including many who are working towards a degree in the health professions.[5] Of the nearly 17.5 million college students in the fall 2020 semester[6], about half of all college students nationally screened positive for depression, anxiety, or both.[7] Many are experiencing loneliness and social isolation, while others have lost family members, their only safe living environments, and support networks. Prospective graduates are facing a weakened economy and a depleted job market, while also carrying large levels of student loan debt. Recent data show that future economic insecurity resulting from the pandemic is among the top concerns of college students[8], further contributing to stress, anxiety, and depression.[9]

As COVID-19 continues to impact the mental and emotional well-being of our health care and public health students and professionals, there are many actions Congress may take to help address these needs among the current and future health care workforce.

One way is to provide additional funding for services to address burnout and suicide, as well as permanent resources to support the mental health of our health care workforce. Another avenue is to build upon the one-time supplemental funding of mental health provisions included in the American Rescue Plan (P.L. 117-2) and incorporate them into permanent authorized programs. This will provide a strong foundation that invests in the mental health of this community, not only during COVID-19, but as they continue to address the pressing health care challenges of our nation. Additionally, more support for institutions of higher education to help them address the growing needs of their students, including those in the health fields, is critical. From awareness campaigns to research dollars and grants, more resources can help hire and train additional counseling staff, facilitate community partnerships, and invest in digital support and telehealth platforms for counseling services.

Mental and behavioral health concerns among our health care and public health providers is not unique to COVID-19. In order to ensure that our students and providers have support that is sustainable and continues in the long-term, FASHP urges Congress to authorize and appropriate funds to all programs that address the mental health needs of our current and future health care workforce.

Furthermore, we strongly urge you to include student loan forgiveness for health professionals in future COVID-19 legislation. Before the pandemic, our nation already faced a shortage of health care professionals; now, more than ever, a robust workforce is critical to meet our country's growing health care needs. With COVID-19 cases still on the rise, health professionals are risking their lives daily for the health of communities across the nation. Some have graduated early to enter the workforce. Others have traveled across the country to practice in COVID-19 hotspots. Health researchers and scientists are leading the charge to discover, test, and approve viable treatments and vaccines to combat COVID-19 and prevent future outbreaks. Off the front lines of the pandemic, providers remain critical to the full health of their patients, especially as we work to reopen the country.

Helping maintain our country's health workforce by reducing their outstanding education debt is certainly in the nation's short-term and long-term interest. Many health professions students

take on significant education debt, which can be a financial burden after graduation, during training, or in medical residency. Despite the cost, many pursue a career serving vulnerable patients in underserved public service facilities, such as federally qualified health centers, rural hospitals, or the Department of Veterans Affairs.

FASHP asks Congress to recognize the importance of financial aid to health professions students, including the federal Direct Graduate PLUS (Grad PLUS) loans and the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program. In addition to Federal Stafford loans, the majority of health professions students rely on Grad PLUS loans to finance their education. Limits to Grad PLUS loans would force students to take out private loans, which typically have higher interest rates and limited repayment options. This creates an additional barrier to entry, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Federal financial aid policies should work to encourage and allow all students - regardless of their socioeconomic status - to pursue health professions careers.

Additionally, the PSLF Program is a critical tool to retain and recruit the health professions workforce and has encouraged graduates to serve both rural and urban medically underserved communities. Many health professions students take on significant debt, and if they pursue a career in public service – such as working in federally qualified health centers or in primary care serving vulnerable patients – they forgo potentially higher earnings. This program helps assist health professions students pursue their passion for working in communities in need while being able to receive loan relief.

We also want to express the importance of supporting health professions education in the *American Jobs Plan* and the *American Families Plan*. As Congress begins the process of developing legislation based on these plans, FASHP appreciates the inclusion of the following proposals:

- Student Aid
 - \$1,400 in additional assistance to low-income students by increasing the Pell Grant award and allowing DREAMers to access Pell Grants;
 - \$62 billion for a grant program to invest in completion and retention activities at colleges and universities that serve high numbers of low-income students;
 - Provide two years of subsidized tuition and expand programs in high-demand fields at HBCUs, TCUs, and MSI;
 - \$2 billion directed towards building a pipeline of skilled health care workers with graduate degrees.
- Institutional Aid
 - \$5 billion to expand existing institutional aid grants to HBCUs, TCUs, and MSIs, which can be used by these institutions to strengthen their academic, administrative, and fiscal capabilities, including by creating or expanding educational programs in high-demand fields (e.g., STEM, computer sciences, nursing, and allied health).
- Health Care
 - Extend expanded ACA premiums tax credits;
 - Funding to train personnel for epidemic and pandemic response.

We invite you to utilize FASHP as a resource if you have any questions about health professions education and training. Furthermore, if you are interested in connecting with health professions schools or programs in your state or district, FASHP members are available to assist you at any time. For additional information, please contact Otto Katt (otto@lewis-burke.com).

Thank you for your time and we look forward to working with you on these important issues in the 117th Congress.

Sincerely,

Federation of Association of Schools of the Health Professions

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine
American Dental Education Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Physical Therapy Association
American Psychological Association
Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges
Association of Chiropractic Colleges
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions
Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health
Association of University Programs in Health Administration
Council on Social Work Education
Physician Assistant Education Association

[1] <https://nam.edu/burnout-among-health-care-professionals-a-call-to-explore-and-address-this-underrecognized-threat-to-safe-high-quality-care/>

[2] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6367114/>

[3] Rossi R, Soggi V, Pacitti F, et al. Mental Health Outcomes Among Frontline and Second-Line Health Care Workers During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic in Italy. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2020;3(5):e2010185. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.10185

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[5] The Generation Lab and Axios. (2020). Students and COVID: The college experience in the midst of a pandemic. Retrieved from:

<https://www.generationlab.org/post/hidden-struggles-sink-fall-semester-for-students>.

[6] National Student Clearing House. Fall 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates. (December 17, 2020). Retrieved from:

https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf.

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- [8] Chegg.org. (February 2021). Global Student Survey. Retrieved from: <https://www.chegg.com/about/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chegg.org-global-student-survey-2021.pdf>.
- [9] Walsemann, K., C. Gee, G.C, and Gentile, D. (2015). Sick of Our Loans: Student Borrowing and Mental Health of Young Adults in the United States. *Social Science and Medicine*. 124: 85-93; Marshall, G.L., Kahana, E., Gallo, W.T., Stansbury, K. L., and Thielke, S. (2020). The price of mental well-being in later life: the role of financial hardship and debt, *Aging & Mental Health*, DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2020.1758902.