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October 22, 2021

The Honorable Anna Eshoo
Chair Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Ranking Member Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Washington, DC 20515

Statement for the Record on “Caring for America: Legislation to Support Patients, Caregivers, and Providers”

Dear Chair Eshoo and Ranking Member Guthrie:

The American Academy of Neurology (AAN), the world’s largest association of neurologists representing 36,000 professionals, is strongly committed to improving the care and outcomes of persons with neurologic illness in a cost-effective manner. One in six people lives with a brain or nervous system condition, including Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, stroke, epilepsy, traumatic brain injury, ALS, multiple sclerosis, and headache.

The AAN thanks the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health for hosting the upcoming legislative hearing on Caring for America: Legislation to Support Patients, Caregivers, and Providers. These issues are especially important given the significant workforce challenges the health care system faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The AAN strongly supports the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act (S. 610/H.R. 1667). This bipartisan, bicameral legislation will help reduce and prevent mental and behavioral health conditions, suicide, and burnout, as well as increase access to evidence-based treatment for physicians, medical students, and other health care professionals, especially those who continue to be overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stigma surrounding mental illness is a well-known barrier to seeking care among the general population, but it can have an even stronger impact among health care professionals. Prior to the pandemic physician burnout was on the rise, with more than 40% of physicians¹ and 60% of neurologists² experiencing at least one symptom. Ultimately, this has been exacerbated during the pandemic and affects the standard of patient care and safety, and the overall efficacy of the US health care system.

For most physicians and other clinicians, seeking treatment for mental health sparks legitimate fear of resultant loss of licensure, loss of income, or other meaningful career setbacks as a result of ongoing stigma. Such fears have deterred them from

¹<https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/physician-burnout-which-medical-specialties-feel-most-stress>

² <https://n.neurology.org/content/88/8/797.short>

accessing necessary mental health care, leaving many to suffer in silence, or worse. In fact, physicians have a significantly higher risk of dying by suicide than the general public. Ensuring clinicians can freely seek mental health treatment and services without fear of professional setback means their mental health care needs can be resolved, rather than hidden away and suffered through. Furthermore, optimal clinician mental health is essential to ensuring that patients have a strong and capable health care workforce to provide the care they need and deserve.

Additionally, it is important to note that the United States is facing a shortage of between 37,800 and 124,000 physicians by 2034 that will likely be exacerbated by rising rates of physician burnout and early retirement due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Furthermore, as the significant impacts of Long COVID for millions of Americans are emerging, having a sufficient workforce to address the additional demand for neurologic care is critical. The population of the United States is also expected to grow by 10.6% by 2034, with a 42.4% increase of individuals aged 65 years and older, and a 74% increase of individuals aged 75 years and older. As life expectancy continues to rise, more Americans will develop chronic neurologic conditions such as Parkinson's disease, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease, which require specialized care.

In the future, we hope the committee will consider additional actions to address the shortage, such as the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2021 (H.R. 2256). This bill would increase the number of Medicare-supported medical resident training positions by 14,000 over seven years, building upon the new 1,000 positions funded at the end of 2020.

In conclusion, we thank you for hosting this hearing focused on legislation to support patients, caregivers, and providers. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Derek Brandt, Director of Congressional Affairs at dbrandt@aan.com or Fred Essis, Congressional Affairs Manager at fessis@aan.com. We look forward to working with you as we all strive to improve care for all Americans with neurologic conditions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Orly Avitzur MD". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Orly Avitzur, MD, MBA, FAAN
President, American Academy of Neurology

³ <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/press-releases/aamc-report-reinforces-mounting-physician-shortage>