



Oct. 26, 2021

The Honorable Anna Eshoo
Chair
Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health
House Energy and Commerce Committee

Dear Chairman Eshoo and Ranking Member Guthrie,

On behalf of our more than 100,000 member physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy, the American Physical Therapy Association appreciates the opportunity to provide a statement for the record on the subcommittee's October 26 hearing "Caring for America: Legislation to Support Patients, Caregivers, and Providers." APTA is dedicated to building a community that advances the physical therapy profession to improve the health of society. As experts in rehabilitation, prehabilitation, and habilitation, physical therapists play a unique role in society in prevention, wellness, fitness, health promotion, and management of disease and disability for individuals across the age span — helping individuals improve overall health and prevent the need for avoidable health care services. Physical therapists' roles include education, direct intervention, research, advocacy, and collaborative consultation. These roles are essential to the profession's vision of transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience.

Physical Therapy Workforce

As of 2019, there were 223,751 licensed physical therapists and 105,892 licensed physical therapist assistants in the United States, according to data from the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy and [reported in a 2020 APTA workforce analysis](#). Based on the U.S. population, there are 68 physical therapists per 100,000 people and 32 physical therapist assistants per 100,000 people. Of those PTs, 76.7% identify their ethnicity as White, 3.6% as Black, 12.9% as Asian, .04% as American Indian, and 5.3% as Hispanic/Latino. Non-white PTs and PTAs are underrepresented in the physical therapy profession, compared with the general population based on U.S. Census data. Racial and ethnic minorities are often underrepresented in physical therapy education as well. In 2020, 4% of students enrolled in physical therapist education programs were Black or African American, 9.5% were Asian or Pacific islander, 7% were Hispanic, fewer than 1% were American Indian/Native Alaskan, and 4% were of two or more races, according to the [Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education](#). Meanwhile, the percentages of those accepted into medical programs overall were 7% African American, 22% Asian, and 6% Hispanic, [according to the Association of American Medical Colleges](#).

APTA is seeking to address this gap through numerous activities, including expanded student recruitment engagement efforts in K-16 settings to diversify the pathways and pipelines into the profession. According to the [Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service 2018-2019 Applicant Data Report](#), Non-white applicants have increased 10% from 2008-2019. APTA is committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in numerous ways including expanding

student recruitment efforts through our diversity pipelines project, increasing DEI fundraising through our Campaign for Future Generations, and creating a standing committee to provide strategic counsel on DEI. APTA's Campaign for Future Generations focuses on grants to improve DEI and a minority scholarship fund for PT and PTA students.

Health Inequities and Patient Outcomes

A recent entry in the [New England Journal of Medicine Catalyst](#) stated that “Even before the pandemic, individuals in vulnerable categories experienced poorer access to post-hospitalization services, lower quality of care, and, in turn, worse rehabilitation outcomes. This trend is expected to be more prevalent as future data about the long-term effects about COVID-19 are published.

Health workforce diversity was important prior to the pandemic, as the Institute of Medicine raised concerns about the diversity of the health care workforce in its 2004 study “[In the Nation's Compelling Interest: Ensuring Diversity in the Health Care Workforce](#).” The report found that racial and ethnic minorities receive a lower quality of health care than non-minorities. It also emphasized that greater diversity among health care providers is associated with “improved access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, greater patient choice and satisfaction, better patient-provider communication, and better educational experiences for all students while in training.”

A [2021 Journal of the American Medical Association article](#) states that increasing the diversity of health care professionals is important because:

- Members of racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to practice in shortage areas.
- It increases patient communication, patient satisfaction, and improves preventive care.
- It improves quality of health care among underserved and minority populations.
- It improves access to care for underserved and minority populations.

Student Loan Burden

All PTs must earn a degree from an accredited physical therapist doctoral program before taking and passing a national licensure exam that permits them to practice. These doctoral programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education. State licensure is required in each state in which a PT practices. The doctoral education programs are comprehensive and prepare physical therapists to meet the needs of society.

However, this rigorous educational preparation, as for most highly skilled health care professionals, comes at a significant financial cost. [According to the results of a January 2020 APTA survey](#) of the physical therapy profession, 93% of PT graduates are in debt for an average of nearly \$153,000 — an amount that doesn't include mortgage debt. For nearly all PTs surveyed, most of their debt load is related to their PT education, with an average balance of \$116,000 in related debt. Overall, the impacts are more severe for non-white PTs, PTs with lower household incomes, and those with financial dependents. Debt balances were higher for non-white PTs, and non-white PTs were 11% more likely than average to have more than one job. Stipends and scholarships are an essential strategy to make physical therapy education more equitable.

In fact, the University of Delaware has developed a program to increase the diversity of physical therapy students. The Advancing Diversity in Physical Therapy (ADaPT) program has helped 136 students of color through mentoring, tutoring, and test preparation. The number of underrepresented students has grown in the last three years from 5% in 2011 to 16% in 2021. [The school reports that this is the most diverse class in the PT program's history.](#)

However, programs such as this are too few and far between to help the large number of underrepresented students who are challenged to pay for a physical therapist education.

Recommendations

The American Physical Therapy Association strongly urges Congress to enact the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3320/S. 1679). This bipartisan legislation would provide scholarships and stipends to accredited higher education programs to recruit qualified individuals who are from underrepresented backgrounds, including students from racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the professions of physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, respiratory therapy, and audiology. H.R. 3637 was introduced by representatives of this committee, Bobby Rush, D-Ill., and Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to provide the subcommittee with our perspective on diversity in the physical therapist workforce and the need to improve opportunities for students from underrepresented backgrounds in the rehabilitation therapy workforce. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact David Scala, APTA congressional affairs senior specialist, at davidscala@apta.org. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon L. Dunn".

Sharon L. Dunn, PT, PhD
Board-Certified Clinical Specialist in Orthopaedic Physical Therapy
President