

Attachment—Additional Questions for the Record

Subcommittee on Health Hearing on “Caring for America: Legislation to Support Patients, Caregivers, and Providers” October 26, 2021

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The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ)

The challenges of the health care workforce predate the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of occupational therapists is projected to grow 17 percent from 2020 to 2030, much faster than the average for all occupations. The issue of access and diversity in rehabilitation providers is not separated into rural or urban problems, but a concern for all our communities. As the Committee considers legislation to address the needs of health care professionals, I would like to better understand the needs of the allied health professionals.

1. What is the projected demand for these allied health professions in the future? How will it be affected by the aging and growing Medicare population?

Chair Pallone,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue. As you noted, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projected employment of occupational therapists to grow by 17 percent between 2020 and 2030. According to the BLS's, this growth is considered “much faster than the average for all occupations.”ⁱ BLS projections of physical therapy, respiratory therapy, audiology, and speech-language pathology, the other allied health professions covered in H.R. 3320, show each profession is expected to experience a similar faster than average growth. The BLS projections of each of these professions were estimates developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The projections of the number of allied health professionals needed to meet demand likely fall far short of the demand the workforce will see over the next decade.

Without an immediate, coordinated, and nationwide effort to attract, recruit, and retain the individuals needed to fill the current and projected openings, the aging Medicare population will further strain this workforce. All the allied health professions included in H.R. 3320 provide vital care to this population. Their work is vital to support people aging in their homes, as well as their care in skilled nursing facilities. The pandemic's impact on the allied health workforce and the greater need for these services will exacerbate the current crisis.

2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted workforce demand for these professions?

The need for allied health professionals has grown in conjunction with their crucial role in recovery from COVID-19 infections, as well as treatment of the effects of “Post-Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection,” (PASCⁱⁱ), 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. Additionally, allied health professionals are also suffering from the same burnout being experienced by other health professionals. The long-term impact of this burnout is still unknown, but our professional associations are hearing many reports of practitioners considering a change of careers or retiring early.

3. Some have suggested that existing programs that could be used to accomplish the goals of the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act. Could you discuss further why existing programs may not be sufficient to addressing diversity in these professions and how the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act would help?

There are existing programs who work to solve parts of the larger problem, but nothing exists which could accomplish the goal of the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act of diversifying these professions. The best example of this is the Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students. This program does provide some similar supports to the students targeted in H.R. 3320, however it isn't specific to any health profession. The allied health workforce is one of the largest health workforces without a specific benefit to increase its diversity, or even attract, recruit, and retain the new practitioners needed to meet the projected growth in demand. The Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act seeks to duplicate the success of the Nursing Workforce Diversity Program, after which it is modeled and has doubled diversity in the nursing profession since its creation.

ⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Occupational Therapists, at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm> (visited December 21, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review, Interpretive Summary for April 2, 2021. Accessed December 21, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html>