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LABOR/ HHS FY 2019 PUBLIC WITNESSES HEARING

**TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR,
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, EDUCATION, AND RELATED AGENCIES**

Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am Paula Overfelt and I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the National AHEC Organization (NAO). I serve as the President of NAO and the Executive Director of the Northwest Missouri Area Health Education Center located in St. Joseph, Missouri. The NAO is the professional organization that represents Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) across the country. We support advances in the AHEC Network to improve health by leading the nation in recruiting, training, and retaining members of a diverse health workforce in underserved communities. As a member of the Health Professions and Nursing Education Coalition (HPNEC), NAO is pleased to recommend \$690 million for the health professions training programs under Title VII and VIII of the *Public Health Service Act* that are administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Of this amount, the NAO recommends **\$40.145 million in FY 2019 for the Area Health Education Center program.**

The AHEC program was originally authorized at the same time as the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) in 1971. The originating legislation sought to provide primary care providers for Community Health Centers (CHCs) and other direct providers of health care services for underserved areas and populations. The creators of the legislation that fostered the AHECs intended for AHECs to be the vehicle to recruit health providers into primary health careers, diversify the workforce, and develop a passion for service to the underserved in these

future providers. Today, as intended, AHECs develop and support the community based training of health professions students in rural and underserved areas. With more than 300 AHECs serving nearly 85% of all the counties in the United States and the District of Columbia, the AHEC network recruits a diverse and broad range of students into health careers and provides continuing education resources that improve the quality of community-based healthcare for underserved populations and areas. Nationwide, over 843,176 students and health professional participated in our health career opportunities last year. Our training sites included 3,721 primary care settings, 3,944 sites in medically underserved communities, and 2,645 sites in rural areas. The AHEC network is enabled to successfully perform these education and training services through its collaborative partnerships with CHCs, the NHSC, Rural Health Clinics, Critical Access Hospitals, Tribal Health Centers, and state and local public health departments.

The AHEC network is a part of an critical pipeline that fuels the recruitment, training, distribution, and retention of a national health workforce. At a time where our nation is projected to have a shortage of nearly 120,000 physicians by 2030, AHEC stands as a central access point in meeting this demanding shortage area. Primary care practitioners are the front-line in prevention of disease and providing cost savings in the United States healthcare system. In recognizing this, the AHEC program engages in pre-pipeline, pipeline, and post-pipeline activities that guide individuals through health careers pathways and beyond, with a special emphasis on primary care doctors. In 2017, AHEC's introduced nearly 402,578 students, ranging from high school to collegiate status, to careers in the health professions and health workforce. The AHEC network facilitated 37,559 rotations and 446 residency rotations. Through training in our AHECs 24,524 students were placed in rural and underserved communities and of this number 14,882 were medical students, 5,603, were associated health professions students, 3,068

were nursing students, 895 were dental students, and 76 studied behavioral health. Additionally AHEC's were responsible for training 403,039 professionals through our continuing education programs. Mr. Chairman, It is these facts that make AHECs integral in the recruitment, training, and retention of the primary care workforce.

AHECs have a continual focus on improving the health care system by working with 120 medical schools, 600 nursing and allied health schools, healthcare settings like CHCs, behavioral health practices, and community-based organizations across the nation. Through these longstanding partnerships, the AHECs employ traditional and innovative approaches to develop and train a diverse health care workforce prepared to deliver culturally appropriate, high-quality, team-based care for rural and underserved communities. AHECs are embedded in the communities they serve, positioning them to respond rapidly to emergent training needs of health professionals, health professions students, and inter-professional teams on issues associated with natural disasters, disease outbreaks (e.g. Zika), and substance use disorders.

Mr. Chairman, thank you and the committee for the opportunity to present the views of the National AHEC Organization. Allow me to re-emphasize the funding request of \$40.145 million for the Area Health Education Centers program. I would be happy to respond to any questions.