

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair, Senate HELP Committee
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Chair Murray,

On behalf of the undersigned national dental and oral health organizations, we urge you to bolster the “Rural and Underserved Pathway to Practice Training Programs” in the House-passed *Build Back Better Act* (H.R. 5376) by expanding eligibility for participation in the program to dental students and residents.

We applaud the House for advancing the *Build Back Better Act*, which addresses the physician shortage, diversifies the physician and national scientific workforce, and improves access to care for people in underserved communities. In particular, we appreciate the expansion of Medicare-funded physician residency slots and the Pathway to Practice Training Program, which promotes physician diversity, and encourages students from economically disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to attend medical school.

Under H.R. 5376, Pathway to Practice will provide 1,000 scholarships annually to help students attend post-baccalaureate programs and medical school starting in 2023. Eligible students for the program include Pell Grant recipients, and students who lived in a medically underserved, rural, or health professional shortage area (HPSA) for four years prior to attending an undergraduate program. In addition, teaching hospitals will be eligible to train graduates of the program without the positions counting toward their GME caps.

Unfortunately, as constructed under the House-passed bill, the Pathway to Practice program leaves out students who intend to enroll in a qualifying dental school, and dental residents who will practice in a HPSA, medically underserved area, public hospital, or rural area. **As the Senate crafts its own version of the *Build Back Better Act*, we strongly urge you to expand eligibility for these scholarships to dental students and residents.**

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, 64 million Americans currently live in dental healthcare shortage areas. An estimated 11,000 practitioners are needed to fill this care gap.¹ Sadly, children in disadvantaged communities are often the most negatively impacted by dental workforce shortages. Indeed, despite being entirely preventable, tooth decay remains the most common chronic disease among children in the United States.²

Financial incentives, such as scholarships, loan repayment and forgiveness programs, can help alleviate the financial barriers that deter students in rural areas from pursuing a career in dentistry. In exchange for the financial support, dentists agree to work in underserved and rural areas where patient volume and earning potential are generally much lower than urban areas.

¹ <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>

² <https://www.nidcr.nih.gov/research/data-statistics/dental-caries>

Dental pipeline programs, sponsored at the state and local level, have proven successful at providing a path of support for underrepresented and low-income students to become dentists. These students tend to stay in their communities serving rural and underserved populations for many years, if not their entire career.³

To address the current level of dental workforce shortages and oral health disparities, however, a national program such as the Pathway to Practice is needed. Investment in this program and expanding eligibility to dental students will help grow and diversify the dental workforce, and improve access to oral healthcare, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

Thank you for your leadership and continued fight to ensure that families have access to quality health care, including oral health care. Should you have any questions regarding our request, please contact Yehuda Sugarman at ysugarman@iadr.org or 703-299-8098.

Sincerely,

American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research
American Dental Education Association
American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology
American Academy of Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology
American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry
American Academy of Periodontology
American Association of Endodontists
American Association of Orthodontists
American Association for Women Dentists
American College of Prosthodontists
American Society of Dentist Anesthesiologists
American Student Dental Association
Diverse Dental Society
National Dental Association
Society of American Indian Dentists

³ https://oralhealthworkforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/OHWRC_Dental_Workforce_Policy_for_Rural_Communities_2020.pdf