

April 17, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We, the National Advisory Council on the National Health Service Corps (NACNHSC), are writing to recommend additional support in the national budget for the National Health Service Corps, (NHSC); a critical resource to addressing the primary care service needs and critical public health issues such as COVID-19 throughout our Nation.

NACNHSC is a group of healthcare providers and administrators who are experts in the issues faced by communities with a shortage of primary care professionals. The Council serves as a key source of information to the NHSC, to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and, by designation, the Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC), celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2020, is the largest and most visible public program working to address the geographic maldistribution of the US health care workforce. NHSC is administered by HRSA's Bureau of Health Workforce (BHW), which supports the NHSC and other programs to improve distribution of providers to underserved areas.

NHSC offers scholarship and loan repayment funding to clinicians in exchange for serving in HPSAs across the US. Currently, more than 13,000 NHSC members provide care, including primary medicine and dentistry, behavioral health care such as substance use disorder treatment, and pharmacy services, to more than 13 million Americans. Settings where NHSC participants serve include federally qualified health centers, which are safety net providers of comprehensive primary and preventive care services; certified rural health clinics; school-based clinics; community mental health centers; critical access hospitals; substance abuse disorder treatment facilities; and others. **Recent evaluations of health care finance models consistently demonstrate that high quality primary medical and dental care, and behavioral health care are major contributors to cost reduction.**

The U.S. currently faces a critical healthcare provider shortage. The Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) most recent data identify 7,059 primary care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) with over 80 million residents in need of 14,656 primary care medicine providers. HRSA identifies 6,319 dental health HPSAs with 59 million residents in need of 10,495 dentists, and 5,565 mental health HPSAs with more than 119 million residents in need of 6,476 mental health care providers (<https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>, data retrieved April 14, 2020).

The Association of American Medical Colleges projects physician demand growing faster than supply, leading to a projected total physician shortfall of between 46,900 and 121,900 physicians by 2032. This shortfall includes 23,600 primary care physicians and 15,600 dentists needed by the Year 2025. In addition to an overall shortage, misdistribution of providers are leaving HPSAs disproportionately affected.

The November 30, 2020 fiscal cliff threatens NHSC program stability and recruitment efforts. In terms of applications, NHSC funds approximately 10% of the new Scholarship applications received and 40% of the new traditional Loan Repayment applications received.

We recommend increasing NHSC’s budget to allow the program to fill positions and train qualified applicants to meet the Nation’s healthcare needs.

Based on our collective experience and expertise, and on evidence about effective strategies for meeting the Nation’s healthcare needs, we believe this budget increase and commitment to the continuation of NHSC will save lives, reduce the burden of critical health issues such as COVID-19, the opioid epidemic, obesity, and chronic diseases, and reduce costs of healthcare.

Respectfully submitted,

/Adrian Billings MD, PhD, FAAFP/

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National Advisory Council on the National Health Service Corps

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