

17 February 2023

Senate Health, Education, Labor Pensions Committee Hearing on Health Care Workforce Shortages

On Thursday (February 16), the Senate Health, Education, Labor Pensions (HELP) Committee held its first hearing of the year entitled, “Examining Health Care Workforce Shortages: Where Do We Go From Here?”

During the hearing, committee members heard testimony from a panel of health care providers who offered solutions to the nation’s current and future shortage of health care workers. Many of the proposals discussed focused on addressing underserved and rural areas, such as through loan repayment programs for providers who work in rural areas, and ways to fill workforce gaps. Lawmakers and panelists discussed improving reimbursement, expanding residency programs, and immigration and other solutions to increase the diversity of the health care workforce. Senate HELP Committee Chair Bernie Sanders (I-VT) began and closed the hearing with a promise to soon introduce legislation to address the workforce shortage.

- For more information: <https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/examining-health-care-workforce-shortages-where-do-we-go-from-here>

Opening statements

HELP Committee Chair Bernie Sanders (I-VT): In his opening statement, Sanders highlighted the current and projected shortages of doctors, nurses, and dentists in the United States. He said fixing the shortage of health care workers could help address rising health care costs by increasing access to preventive care. Sanders noted that workforce shortages are particularly acute in minority communities and that the U.S. needs to improve the diversity of its health care providers. Sanders said, “The American people want this committee to produce some serious legislation that address these crises, and that is exactly what we must do.” He said the committee needs to “significantly expand and improve the Graduate Medical Education (GME) program”, “expand the Teaching Health Center program”, increase scholarship and loan forgiveness offerings at the National Health Service Corps, increase the number of nurse faculty, and better support emergency medical services (EMS) where in some areas they rely on “volunteers or underpaid professionals.” [Full statement.](#)

HELP Committee Ranking Member Bill Cassidy (R-LA): In his opening statement, Cassidy shared several ways to address the workforce shortage, such as “increasing nursing educational opportunities, to help certified nurse’s assistants to be LPNs, the LPN to be a certificate RN, and the certificate RN to be a bachelor’s RN.” Cassidy said states will play a large role in reforming nurse education. In addition, he said the committee must better understand the reasons behind physician burnout and examine health care workforce programs that are working and fix those that are not. Cassidy noted that the Senate HELP Committee this year will need to extend mandatory funding for programs like the National Health Service Corps and the Teaching Health Centers Graduate Medical Education program, as well as reauthorizing the Children’s Hospital Graduate Medical Education program. He said, “It is important that funding for these programs is extended on time, in a bipartisan fashion, with the appropriate spending offsets.” [Full statement](#)

Witness Testimony

James Herbert PhD, President, University of New England (UNE): In his testimony, Dr. Herbert offered six strategies to help address the health care workforce shortage crisis. For example, he said we need to increase the number of health care professionals we educate by reforming the Medicare GME program, increasing access to scholarship and loan repayment programs, and innovative solutions to the nursing faculty shortage, such as UNE's accelerated nursing program. In addition, he said we need to recruit and train a more diverse workforce and encourage providers to practice in underserved areas, train the workforce on how to use telehealth and digital health, enact state-level changes to ensure providers can practice at the top of their license, and reform the educational model to facilitate career advancing while working. [Full Testimony](#)

James E.K. Hildreth Sr., PhD, MD, President and CEO, Meharry Medical College: In his testimony, Dr. Hildreth spoke about the ways Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are "uniquely qualified" to help solve the workforce shortage problem and improve the diversity among health care professionals. He said the four HBCU medical schools formed a consortium that "has the necessary history, organizational structure, deep relationships with national and international organizations dedicated to eradicating health care disparities, and credibility within disenfranchised communities to scale up immediately and rapidly." However, Dr. Hildreth said HBCUs cannot increase the number of graduates without increased funding and requested \$5 billion over the next five years to ensure HBCUs have the infrastructure necessary to train a more diverse health care workforce, as well as changes to the Medicare GME program to prioritize HBCUs and add "non-contiguous area" to the "rural" criterion. [Full Testimony](#)

Sarah Szanton PhD, RN, FAAN, Dean, Johns Hopkins School of Nursing: In her testimony, Ms. Szanton spoke about the nursing shortage and the looming nursing experience shortage as older nurses begin to retire. She outlined a multi-pronged solution that addresses recruitment, training, and retention. She spoke about the nurse faculty shortage and the need to pay nurse faculty on par with clinical nurses, as well as the need to incorporate people with disabilities into the nursing workforce. In addition, she spoke about the need to train nurses for the future state of health care, "in which most encounters will happen at home, online, in clinics, at schools, or in businesses." She encouraged the committee to pass the Future Advancement of Academic Nursing Act when it is re-introduced in Congress to address barriers experienced by nursing faculty and students. [Full Testimony](#)

Leonardo Seoane MD, FACP, Chief Academic Officer, Ochsner Health: In his testimony, Dr. Seoane spoke about the workforce shortage in Louisiana and the actions Ochsner has taken to increase the pipeline. For example, he spoke about partnerships with local community colleges to train nurses and allied health professionals, a scholarship program that requires recipients to work at the health system for 1-3 years, a nursing pre-apprenticeship program that enables high school sophomores and community college students to apprentice as nurses, as well as apprenticeships to help current Ochsner workers' tuition-free career growth. In addition, he said Ochsner partnered with Xavier University to create a new medical school to improve diversity. In addition to building on programs at Ochsner, Dr. Seoane outlined several recommendations for addressing the workforce shortage, including increasing Medicare GME funding and making permanent certain Medicare telehealth flexibilities. [Full Testimony](#)

Douglas Staiger PhD, Professor, Dartmouth College: In his testimony, Dr. Staiger discussed ongoing research on the nursing workforce, including analyses on employment and earnings, application rates to nursing education programs, and rural nurses. Based on his research, Dr. Staiger highlighted three areas of concern: a shift in the nursing workforce away from hospitals, a decline in academic preparedness of nurses entering and leaving nursing schools, and a lack of diversity in rural areas. [Full Testimony](#)

Q&A

Committee Chair Sanders (I-VT) asked the panel about the impact of travel nurses and the shortage of nurse faculty to train new nurses. In response, Ms. Szanton said the U.S. needs to increase nurse programs through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), such as the Nursing Corps Scholarship Program, and reiterated her support for the Future Advancement of Academic Nursing Act. When asked about the impact of under representation in the health care workforce, Dr. Hildreth said the data show when health care workforce reflects the population they care for, the outcomes are better.

In addition, Sen. Sanders asked about expanding community health center programs and teaching health center GME programs to get residents out of teaching hospitals and into primary health care facilities. Dr. Herbert said he supports expanding those programs and said states, such as Georgia, have taken creative steps toward expansion. Dr. Hildreth agreed, saying additional GME slots in those settings would be beneficial.

Ranking Member Cassidy (R-LA) asked whether better access to Medication-Assisted Treatments (MATs) could reduce emergency department use and workplace violence. Dr. Seoane agreed but said digital solutions to manage chronic conditions like diabetes or hypertension could also be used to decrease ED visits and move care into the community. Sen. Cassidy also asked Dr. Staiger about data suggesting nursing applicants are struggling to pass the nurse licensure exam in the wake of COVID-19 and the impact of online learning.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) questioned Dr. Szanton about Johns Hopkins' policy requiring students to receive three vaccines and the risk to certain men and women of myocarditis after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Sen. Paul spoke about the importance for both students and patients to be able to choose whether or not to receive a vaccine.

Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) asked the panel for ideas on how to advance education without requiring health care workers to leave the workforce, as well as ways to address the shortage of nurses in rural areas. Dr. Herbert said that incentives to work in rural areas or placements in rural areas would be impactful. Sen. Hassan also asked about how additional psychiatrists can help address the behavioral health crisis and what more can be done to support the behavioral health workforce. Dr. Seoane talked about how Ochsner launched scholarship programs for primary care and psychiatry to help fill the need for psychiatrists in the state.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) asked about ways to bridge the nursing faculty gap and expand training capacity. Dr. Herbert said UNE increased the number of nurses trained 300% in the past 10 years and looks for creative ways to address the nursing faculty shortage. He described one program done in partnership with Maine Health that trains nurses on site in Maine Health hospitals. Sen. Collins also asked Dr. Hildreth what Meharry Medical College does to encourage students to work in rural and underserved areas. He said his state helped to create an accelerated program that recruits students from rural areas and admits them to medical school as part of their undergraduate experience.

Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-CO) asked about ways to build out apprenticeship programs to address public health needs. Dr. Seoane said Ochsner's pre-apprenticeship program, which enables high school students to have apprenticeships with nurses, is still in the early phases and is expected to have 600 students by the fall. He added that the program will help support the state's Healthy State initiative to improve Louisiana's health ranking.

When asked about the importance of increasing diversity and how to help younger generations enter health care careers, Dr. Hildreth said his school has adopted two middle schools to familiarize the students with medical professions.

Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) discussed the importance of reducing the role of government in health care and how the State Department's COVID-19 policies have slowed the interview process that would enable more foreign nurses to practice in the United States and support the workforce shortage. Dr. Herbert touted the importance of immigrants in the U.S. health care workforce, saying UNE's pharmacy and dental school have accelerated programs that take foreign trained dentists and pharmacists and help them become eligible for American licensure.

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) asked how immigration reform could help address the health care workforce crisis. Dr. Herbert said arcane regulations can keep qualified immigrants from working in the U.S. health care system, while Dr. Hildreth suggested that with the proper resources we could fill a lot of the workforce gap with native workers. Sen. Kaine also mentioned his bill, the Expanding Medical Education Act, which would direct resources to HBCUs and spoke about the importance of including shortages in long-term and home care in these conversations.

Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) spoke about his experience working as a physician in rural America and suggested community colleges could be a solution to the nursing shortage and to encourage work in rural areas. Sen. Marshall said that physicians are leaving the profession due to burnout and issues related to prior authorization, surprise billing, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Seoane said frontline health care workers do not get a break from the pandemic and can feel extreme burnout. In addition, Dr. Seoane said the U.S. needs to improve the working environment and safety for health care workers. He noted that Ochsner has a wellness office and wellness programs for nurses and physicians and that the health system worked with the state to make violence in the health care workplace a felony. Sen. Marshall also asked about how health systems view primary care residencies versus residencies like oncology that bring in more revenue. Dr. Seoane said Ochsner would be excited about funding to expand primary and community care.

Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) spoke about the physician shortages occurring in Massachusetts, including urban areas, and the impact on patients. He asked the panel how to address those shortages, particularly for behavioral health. Dr. Herbert said UNE is developing a program to train nurse practitioners in psychiatry and invest in programs to support entry-level behavioral health jobs with a bachelor's degree. Sen. Markey also asked about the impact of climate change on health.

Sen. Ted Budd (R-NC) said we need to focus on preparing the future health care workforce and discussed the role community colleges can play in training the community workforce. Dr. Seoane said Ochsner is working to get more entry level workers into health care and improve community care. Sen. Budd also asked about steps needed to train workers to treat patients in non-traditional settings, like telehealth, home health, and community health centers.

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) spoke about violence against health care workers and her bill, the Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act which would require employers to write and implement workplace violence prevention programs. Dr. Seoane said the environment today is particularly charged and that Ochsner worked with the state to increase penalties for both physical and verbal violence in health care settings. Sen. Baldwin also discussed the Palliative Care and Hospice Education and Training Act to support and grow the hospice workforce and asked how to train providers on palliative care. Dr. Seoane spoke about a program to train residents on palliative care and the benefit the residents experienced by being able to discuss events related to death.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) spoke about the importance of telehealth in rural states like Alaska and discussed shortages of EMS workers. Dr. Seoane said telehealth is critical to reaching rural communities and the pandemic has shown we can provide effective care via telehealth. Dr. Seoane said Ochsner's virtual nursing program is a patient facing program that enables nurses to clinically care for the patient at the bedside 24/7, while telehealth

nurses handle the administrative work. Dr. Herbert added that state level regulations, licensing boards, accrediting bodies, and reimbursement must keep up with the pace of telehealth beyond the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) focused on mental health workforce shortages and barriers to entering the field, such as taking on student loan debt. Sen. Smith said she reintroduced the Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act to provide student loan repayment for mental health professionals who work in underserved areas. Dr. Herbert said we need to train teachers and primary care providers in mental health and target underserved areas when bolstering the mental health workforce. Sen. Smith also asked about disparities in maternal health care.

Sen. Mike Braun (R-IN) said the health care industry is broken and the health care sector needs to enact changes to make health care a more desirable place to work through increased competition, transparency, removing the barriers to entry, and making it entrepreneurial. Sen. Braun also spoke about the importance of investing in K-12. Dr. Seoane said Ochsner's pre-apprenticeship program works with local high schools to encourage students to enter the workforce, but to scale those they need support from universities and government. Dr. Hildreth noted that health care in the United States is mostly sick care, and the U.S. should do more to prevent illness before it occurs.

Sen. Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) asked the panel how to develop innovative models, like Project ECHO, a telemetry model to improve learning. Dr. Herbert said universities have a role in providing continuing education for existing providers and can utilize tools like Project ECHO to facilitate those learnings across communities. In response to a question on how to retain health care workers, Dr. Hildreth emphasized the importance of training primary care doctors in identifying behavioral health concerns. Sen. Luján also spoke about the role of nurse midwives in filling shortage gaps and the lifesaving role EMS workers play in providing emergency care, noting the vital role they played in his own medical treatment when he suffered a stroke last year.

If you have questions, please contact [Heather Meade](#) or [Heather Bell](#).

Washington Council Ernst & Young

Washington Council Ernst & Young (WCEY) is a group within Ernst & Young LLP that combines the power of a leading professional services organization with on-the-ground knowledge, personal relationships and attention to detail of a boutique policy firm. We provide our clients with timely, relevant Washington insight and legislative advisory services customized to their needs. To learn more, contact wcey@ey.com.