

May 16, 2003

The Honorable Ralph Regula
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health
and Human Services, and Education
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Obey
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Obey:

The organizations listed below, representing the breadth and depth of the nation's health care delivery system, are contacting you to urge your support for at least \$175 million in funding for the nursing workforce development programs contained in Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act. Our nation is struggling with a growing shortage of registered nurses (RNs) that impacts our hospitals, long-term care facilities, home health agencies, and public health clinics on a daily basis. As RNs are the largest health care delivery workforce in the nation, this burgeoning shortage threatens the very fabric of our health care system.

The nursing shortage is already directly impacting patient care. A recent survey of hospitals across the nation concluded nursing shortages are causing emergency department overcrowding, emergency department diversions, increased wait times for surgery, discontinued patient care programs or reduced service hours, delayed discharges, and canceled surgeries. In addition, numerous recent studies have detailed the positive relationship between nursing and quality patient care.

Disturbingly, this is just the beginning of the nursing shortage. The Division of Nursing at the Health Resources and Services Administration projects that, absent aggressive intervention, the supply of nurses in America will fall 29 percent below requirements by the year 2020. Recent efforts to attract more people into the nursing profession have resulted in a slight increase in school admissions. However, projections show that the aging workforce (the average age of RNs is 45 years) and the increased demand for health services from aging Baby Boomers will aggravate the current crisis in health care delivery over the next two decades.

Recent world events have further exacerbated this shortage. Bioterrorism preparedness efforts rely heavily upon nurses – both as administrators of the smallpox vaccine and as first responders. In addition, the activation of military reserves has drawn even more nurses out of the domestic labor market (there are more than 19,000 RNs in the military reserves). Therefore, this shortage threatens our very strength as a nation.

Last year, Congress took the visionary step of passing the Nurse Reinvestment Act (PL 107-205), which expanded and reinforced the programs of Title VIII. This historic legislation holds the promise of attracting more people into the nursing profession, increasing the capacity for nurse education, and encouraging practicing nurses to remain in the profession. However, these programs will not become a reality without adequate new appropriations.

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We strongly urge you to complete the promise of the Nurse Reinvestment Act. Your support for at least \$175 million in FY 2004 funding for Title VIII is crucial to addressing this looming crisis.

Sincerely,

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Health Care Association
American Hospital Association
American Nurses Association
American Organization of Nurse Executives
Federation of American Hospitals
Gentiva Health Services
Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations
VHA Inc.
Visiting Nurse Associations of America