



February 14, 2006

The Honorable Jim Nussle
Chairman, Budget Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am contacting you on behalf of the American Nurses Association (ANA) to urge you to make funding for nursing workforce development programs a priority in the FY 2007 budget resolution. Specifically, we ask you to increase the Function 550 budget authority to allow for a significant increase in appropriations for nursing workforce development programs (Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act).

Nurses are the primary source of care and support for patients at the most vulnerable points in their lives. Nearly every person's health care experience involves a Registered Nurse (RN). As a result, a sufficient supply of nurses is critical in providing our nation's population with quality health care. Nurses are expected to play an even larger role in the future. The U.S. Department of Labor currently projects a 21% increase in the need for nurses nationwide from 1998 to 2008, compared with a 14% increase for all other occupations. This means that health care facilities will need to fill more than 1.1 million registered nurse job openings by 2012, to accommodate growing patient needs and to replace retiring nurses.

Current funding levels fail to meet the growing need for nurses. In fiscal year 2005, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) was forced to turn away 82% of the applicants for the Nurse Education Loan Repayment Program (NELRP), and 98% of the applicants for the Nursing Scholarship program due to lack of adequate funding. These much-needed programs are used to direct RNs into areas with the greatest need – including departments of public health, community health centers, and disproportionate-share hospitals.

Nurses are also the cornerstone of bioterrorism preparedness and response. In the event of a terrorist attack, nurses are needed to evaluate patients, administer vaccines and medications, perform disease surveillance, and train non-licensed staff. The GAO reported in 2003 that state and local health officials in many states cited the nursing shortage as an impediment to their bioterrorism preparedness efforts (GAO-03-373).

The nursing shortage is also stressing military health care delivery. The Army, Navy, and Air Force are offering new lucrative RN recruitment packages that include large sign-on bonuses, generous scholarships, and loan forgiveness packages. Yet, neither the Army nor the Air Force has met their active service nurse recruitment goals since the 1990s. Last year, Army leaders warned the Senate Appropriations Committee that they were experiencing a 30% shortage of certified registered nurse anesthetists. In 2004, the Navy Nurse Corps recruitment fell 32% below target. This ongoing nurse shortage is creating real concerns about the ability to deliver needed health care to today's military.

Therefore, this shortage impacts our very strength as a nation. America's nurses urge you to address this crisis. We urge you to provide a function 550 allocation that supports full funding for RN recruitment, education, and retention programs.

Sincerely,

Rose Gonzalez, MPS, RN
Director, Government Affairs