

U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Helps introduce bill to expand health care workforce to meet nationwide challenges highlighted by COVID-19

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) joined her colleagues, led by Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL-09), in introducing bicameral legislation to provide a historic investment in the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) and Nurse Corps programs to cover graduate education costs for more than 300,000 clinicians in order to help address existing health workforce shortages throughout our health care system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed existing health workforce shortages, while simultaneously imposing unprecedented strains on America's heroic frontline health professionals. A substantial barrier in meeting our nation's health workforce needs is the student debt associated with graduate health education—which can average more than \$200,000. COVID-19 has also magnified alarming racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes, which can be partially addressed by expanding the representation of minority populations working in health careers.

The *Health Heroes 2020 Act* would address these challenges and entice promising students from diverse backgrounds into careers as primary health professionals—physicians, dentists, mental health professionals, nurses, and physician assistants—in underserved communities by providing historic new funding levels for scholarship and loan repayment options in exchange for a service commitment in an urban or rural area with a shortage of providers. The legislation would also immediately surge \$30 billion into the NHSC and Nurse Corps, further

increase the annual funding level for NHSC by 300 percent, and create a new Reserve Corps to boost our health care surge capacity in response to public health emergencies.

“Brave health care workers are on the frontlines every day fighting this pandemic and serving our communities. But it’s clear that this public health crisis has exposed and accelerated a very real, immediate need for more health care workers throughout our nation,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “This legislation will scale up our health care workforce so we can boost hospital capacity, address health disparities in underserved communities, and save more lives.”

“Our health care professionals are doing heroic work on the front lines of our pandemic response. But the current public health crisis has highlighted our need for a national policy that increases the number of health workers to address shortages, medical disparities, and respond to emergencies. The *Health Heroes 2020 Act* is a tribute to the inspiring work of our health workforce and a commitment to our future by expanding the NHSC and Nurse Corps programs to provide a boost of more than 300,000 clinicians in underserved communities,” **said Senator Durbin.** “I’m proud to introduce this bill with my colleague, Congresswoman Schakowsky, and urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for their support.”

“The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need for more health care providers throughout many parts of our country. We need to immediately reinforce those heroes who are working day and night to save lives. Additionally, as we look beyond this crisis, we also have an opportunity to build the kind of world-class health infrastructure that meets the needs of all Americans in every community,” **said Representative Schakowsky.** “I am proud to introduce the *Health Heroes 2020 Act* with my friend and Senator, Dick Durbin. Our plan will build a nationwide pipeline that will make it possible for students of every background to become the doctors and nurses we need without incurring huge debt.”

The United States is projected to face a shortage of up to 120,000 doctors over the next decade, and estimates show the need for 200,000 new nurses for each of the next several years. Within these fields, there are significant shortages in both urban and rural communities as well as among specialties, including in primary care and behavioral health. COVID-19 has upended this equation, with providers being called back into service from retirement, fourth-year medical students being graduated early, and health professionals traveling to potentially distant areas of need to

deliver care.

Along with Baldwin, Durbin and Schakowsky, the bill is also cosponsored by Senators Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Doug Jones (D-AL), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MI), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Tina Smith (D-MN), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and Kamala Harris (D-CA).

Specifically, the *Health Heroes 2020 Act* would expand the NHSC and Nurse Corps programs by:

Emergency Surge Funding to Restore Workforce Pipeline

- Providing a one-time, supplemental appropriation of \$25 billion for scholarship and loan forgiveness awards through the NHSC, and \$5 billion through the Nurse Corps program;
- o Includes a 40 percent set-aside for populations historically underrepresented in health care (racial/ethnic minorities and students from low-income urban/rural areas);

Sustainable Growth to Meet Nation's Health Care Needs

- Increasing the annual mandatory NHSC funding level from \$310 million to \$1 billion to increase scholarship and loan forgiveness awards to meet the nation's health needs;

Creation of Reserve Corps for Surge Capacity

- Establishing a NHSC Reserve Corps demonstration option to allow health professionals to serve for two years in "reserve status" for each qualifying year of scholarship. Would permit such health professionals to work in the private practice setting of their choice, but:
 - o In the event of a health emergency/disaster would be called up to serve at the direction of HHS Secretary (alongside the Public Health Commissioned Corps or health departments);
 - o Require a monthly commitment, similar to the National Guard, to conduct preparedness training or deliver care to an underserved community;

- Allows currently practicing health care professionals—who did not participate in the NHSC program—to opt into this reserve status and obtain loan forgiveness;
- Expands emergency surge capacity by allowing NHSC members to serve in high-need areas during a public health emergency.

The *Health Heroes 2020 Act* is supported by the following organizations: Association of Clinicians for the Underserved, Association of American Medical Colleges, National Association of Community Health Centers, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, American Association of Nurse Practitioners, Physician Assistant Education Association, and the Consortium of Universities for Global Health.

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