Why it’s time to invest in the nation’s health care workforce

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What’s the news: The AMA is supporting a bipartisan Senate bill, the “Strengthening America’s Health Care Readiness Act,” that would help grow the nation’s pipeline of future physicians and nurses while creating opportunities to diversify the health workforce.

“As the nation faces a pandemic and multiple health professional shortages, sustained, long-term investments in workforce programs are necessary to help care for our nation’s most vulnerable populations,” AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter of support to the bill’s sponsors, Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla.

The bill also recognizes the crushing student debt that can entrap and limit the career decisions of new health professionals upon graduation, and it provides for scholarships and debt forgiveness in exchange for a commitment to works and practice in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs).

“This vital legislation will help to sustain the current workforce during the pandemic and help maintain a robust pipeline of providers for future health emergencies,” Dr. Madara’s letter adds.

Why it’s important: The bill would offer a one-time supplemental appropriation of $5 billion in emergency surge funding for scholarships and loan forgiveness awards through the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), plus $1 billion through the Nurse Corps.

In addition, 40% would be set aside for students from low-income communities and those from racial and ethnic populations that have been historically underrepresented in health professions.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for additional emergency capacities and underscored the health workforce shortages and disparities that exist throughout the nation,” Dr. Madara wrote. “This bill would bring access to care for patients and welcome relief to the physicians, residents, and nurses who have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic caring for our sickest patients.”
And, while existing programs have had some success recruiting professionals to work in underserved areas, the NHSC and Nurse Corps “still fall short of fulfilling the health care needs” of all HPSAs, Dr. Madara’s letter says.

Additionally, the bill would create an annual allocation of up to $50 million from 2022 through 2026 to establish a NHSC Emergency Service demonstration project involving current NHSC participants or alumni of the program, aiding in our surge capacity efforts during national disasters by allowing them to serve in the National Disaster Medical System.

This demonstration project provides a pathway for individuals to receive supplemental loan repayments in exchange for improving the nation’s disaster preparedness and surge capacity.

**What’s next:** The bill has been referred to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee but no further action has been taken.

“COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for a national policy that increases the number of health workers to address shortages, medical disparities, and respond to emergencies,” Durbin, the Senate Majority Whip, said in a news release.