

January 19, 2022

Dear Illinois Health Care Partners:

I am writing to alert you to an historic opportunity. First, of course, thank you for your tremendous efforts over the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic to address health care challenges throughout our state, especially for our most vulnerable and underserved communities.

Second, as you may be aware, the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021* (P.L. 117-2), provides a combined \$1 billion in supplemental appropriations for National Health Service Corps (NHSC) and Nurse Corps programs through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). As the author of these provisions, I write to highlight this funding availability to ensure Illinois health care stakeholders maximize this opportunity to help address health workforce shortages and health disparities.

The NHSC and Nurse Corps programs provide scholarship and loan repayment options to qualified primary care medical, dental, and behavioral health clinicians—including physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, dentists, and behavioral health providers—in exchange for providing care at a qualified site in an urban or rural area with provider shortages. These scholarship and loan repayment awards supplement existing salaries/contracts, in order to entice our brightest minds to serve in needy areas who may otherwise be driven to pursue more lucrative paths in order to pay off their student loan debt.

Since March 2020, workforce strains have been a major challenge for health care facilities—clinicians were called out of retirement or from other jurisdictions, and students were graduated early to enter the field. At the same time, health care workers have faced unimaginable levels of stress and burnout, driving many providers to leave the field early. However, these workforce gaps existed well-before COVID-19, with estimates suggesting more than 30,000 additional practitioners are required to address the shortage of primary care, dental, and mental health professionals in areas that are home to more than 60 million Americans.

The pandemic also has exacerbated unconscionable racial and ethnic health disparities, including as seen in COVID-19 mortality rates. One contributing factor to the inequalities of why communities of color too often live sicker and die younger is the lack of diversity in health professions. While Black and Latino individuals comprise more than 30 percent of the United States' population, they account for less than 11 percent of the national physician workforce. Studies show that greater representation of people of color among health care providers can improve health outcomes by fostering trust, communication, and more preventive screenings.

As of September 2020, there were more than 800 trained professionals providing care in urban and rural parts of Illinois through the NHSC and Nurse Corps—whether in a hospital, community health center, rural health clinic, school-based clinic, health department, or other site. Yet, while thousands of qualified applicants apply each year for these scholarship and loan repayment programs, traditionally only a fraction are able to be funded. For example, in fiscal year 2019, only 11 percent of NHSC scholarship applicants and 45 percent of loan repayment applicants were funded.

The *American Rescue Plan*'s funding for the NHSC and Nurse Corps represents the largest single-year appropriation for our clinical health workforce in history, as the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the need for these two critical programs. The combined \$1 billion for the NHSC and Nurse Corps programs holds the promise of shaping the pipeline of health care providers to emphasize recruitment of individuals from historically under-represented populations, including communities of color and disadvantaged urban or rural backgrounds.

In the first year under the *American Rescue Plan*, HRSA was able to award almost 1,200 NHSC new scholarships—a four-fold increase—and nearly doubled the number of Nurse Corps scholarship awards to 544. This has bolstered the field strength of NHSC and Nurse Corps to the highest level ever—with more than 22,000 HRSA-funded health care providers, including Hispanic/Latino physicians accounting for 18 percent of NHSC participants, and Black/African American nurses representing 20 percent of Nurse Corps participants.

Importantly, significant supplemental funds from the *American Rescue Plan* remain available in fiscal year 2022 to support applications from Illinois health care providers and students. I want to draw your attention to the following deadlines and links for information, which I encourage you to disseminate widely to your members across our state:

- NHSC Loan Repayment – February 3 deadline: <https://nhsc.hrsa.gov/loan-repayment/nhsc-loan-repayment-program>
- Nurse Corps Loan Repayment – January 27 deadline: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/funding/apply-loan-repayment/nurse-corps>
- NHSC Scholarship – expected Spring 2022 (~April) deadline: <https://nhsc.hrsa.gov/scholarships/how-to-apply>
- Nurse Corps Scholarship – expected Spring 2022 (~April) deadline: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/funding/nurse-corps-sp-guidance.pdf>

I greatly appreciate your commitment to our current and future workforce, and the patients and communities served by them. The pandemic has underscored the long-term challenges in our health care delivery system, and it is my hope that this significant new funding and emphasis on recruiting a diverse workforce can help begin to close gaps and promote equity. Please contact my staff with any questions about these HRSA funding opportunities.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator