



Support for Education & Workforce Diversity for Rehabilitation Professionals

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare sector including rehabilitation has been hit hard by therapists exiting the profession due to the mental anguish, high risk of exposure and vaccine mandates. Shortages of rehabilitation professionals will ultimately impact the access to care for Medicare beneficiaries especially in rural and underserved areas. Physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and speech language pathologists are considered essential health care workers but are often excluded from state and federal programs that incentivize individuals to pursue careers in these fields. As the need for healthcare rises, so does the need for more rehabilitation professionals but the costs of education are high and often a deterrent for students. NARA supports incentives including student loan debt relief, assistance in defraying the cost of education and scholarships or stipends to accredited higher education programs to recruit qualified individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to pursue rehabilitation educational degrees.

The Physical Therapist Workforce and Patient Access Act (H.R. 3759/S. 2676), introduced by Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO) and Kelly Armstrong (R-ND); and by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) and Roger Wicker (R-MS) these bi-partisan bills would make physical therapists eligible for the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program. This program assists primary care, mental health and dental providers in repaying eligible student loans in exchange for working areas with shortages of such providers.

The Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act (S.1578/H.R.3150) would expand access to mental health services and increase opportunities for occupational therapy in mental health was reintroduced by Sens. Tina Smith (D-MN) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and Reps. Grace Napolitano (D-CA) and John Katko (R-NY) re-introduced this piece of legislation aims to increase the number of mental health professionals working in underserved areas by providing loan forgiveness to mental health professionals who practice in areas designated as having a shortage of mental health professionals. This bill includes occupational therapists in the list of behavioral health professionals eligible to receive this loan forgiveness.

The Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3320/S. 1679) introduced by Rep. Bobby Rush (D-IL) and Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK); and Senators Robert Casey (D-PA) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) would allow the Department of Health and Human Services to provide grants to accredited education programs to increase diversity in the physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, audiology, and speech-language pathology professions. Grants may be used to provide scholarships or to support recruitment and retention of students from underrepresented groups.

Additional steps Congress can consider in alleviating staffing shortages include:

- Increase funding for processing of work visas for foreign trained healthcare workers and consider the broader healthcare staffing shortage, including in rehab and therapy services, in legislation related to professional level visas
- Increase funding for Medicare to increase reimbursement for rehabilitation providers who have experienced consistent cuts in reimbursement total nearly 29%+ over the past 11 years. These reimbursement cuts continue to create a financial hardship for providers operating on already slim margins

NARA is the trade association representing 90+ organizations consisting of over 80,000 healthcare professionals dedicated to providing a multitude of skilled rehabilitation therapy services to individuals in a variety of settings including inpatient, outpatient, skilled care, assisted living, educational systems, industry/occupational health.