

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 1, 2004

The Honorable Ralph Regula
Chairman
Labor, HHS, and Education Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Obey
Ranking Member
Labor, HHS, and Education Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Regula and Ranking Member Obey:

We respectfully urge you to make funding for nursing workforce development programs a priority in the FY 2005 Labor, HHS Appropriations bill. Specifically, we ask you to support a \$63 million increase in appropriations for the nurse training programs authorized under Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act.

Our nation is struggling with a growing shortage of registered nurses (RNs) that threatens the entire health care system. This February, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that registered nursing will have the greatest job growth of all US professions in the time period spanning 2002 – 2012. During this decade, health care facilities will need to fill more than 1.1 million RN job openings.

The nursing shortage is already directly affecting patient care. Surveys of hospitals have shown that nursing shortages are causing emergency department overcrowding, emergency department diversions, increased wait times for surgery, discontinued patient care programs or reduced service hours, delayed discharges, and canceled surgeries.

Congress recently took the critical step of passing the Nurse Reinvestment Act (PL 107-205), which expanded and improved the nursing workforce development programs administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) under Title VIII. This legislation holds the promise of attracting more people into the nursing profession, increasing the capacity for nurse education, and encouraging practicing nurses to remain in the profession. However, these programs will not become a reality without significant new appropriations.

Among other programs, the Nurse Reinvestment Act created the nurse corps. This program offers loan repayments and scholarships to RNs and nursing students who agree to work full-time for at least two years in a health care facility deemed to have a critical shortage of nurses. HRSA indicates that in FY 2003, 8,321 nurses applied for the loan repayment program, and 4,512 nursing students applied for the nursing scholarship. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, HRSA could only approve 602 loan repayments and a mere 94 scholarships. Therefore, 92% of the nurses willing to immediately enter facilities hardest hit by the shortage were turned away from the corps, and 98% of the nursing students willing to work in these facilities when they graduate were also denied access to this new program.

We urge you to meet the promise of the Nurse Reinvestment Act by making funding for nursing workforce development a priority. Your support for a total of at least \$205 million in FY 2005 funding for nursing workforce development is vital to maintaining and improving the health of our nation.

Sincerely,

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Signatories to the Nurse Education Funding Letter of April 1, 2004

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