

August 31, 2023

The Honorable Tim Kaine
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Kaine:

The American Geriatrics Society (AGS) is pleased to support the Rural Health Workforce Pathway Act, legislation that would support underserved rural communities in addressing long-term health workforce shortages by encouraging K-12 students to explore careers in health care. Among other items, the bill would help facilitate collaboration with career and technical education to support apprenticeship programs such as nursing assistants, medical assistants, and pharmacy technicians.

The AGS is a non-profit organization comprised of nearly 6,000 geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of older Americans. The AGS believes in a just society – one where we all are supported by and able to contribute to communities and where ageism, ableism, classism, homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of bias and discrimination no longer impact healthcare access, quality, and outcomes for older adults and their caregivers. We advocate for policies and programs that support the health, independence, and quality of life of all of us as we age.

The older adult population is projected to increase dramatically in the coming years. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people aged 65 and older is estimated to climb from 61.6 million today to more than 94.7 million by 2060, while those 85 and older is projected to more than double from 7.1 million today to 19 million by 2060.¹ As our aging population increases, so too will the prevalence of diseases disproportionately that affect older people. Older people with chronic illnesses and complex conditions often do not receive optimal care which reduces overall well-being and contributes to disproportionately high healthcare costs for these individuals. Given the increasing number of older Americans and those with multiple chronic and complex conditions, it is crucial to address the shortage of health professionals and in particular those expertly trained to care for older people.

In the U.S. there is a workforce crisis with a disappearing supply of primary care providers, including geriatrics health professionals. There are similar shortages of health professionals specializing in geriatrics across other disciplines. Research shows that 30 percent of people 65-years-old and older need care from a geriatrician, and that each geriatrician can care for up to 700 patients.² This translates to a larger demand for geriatricians – both nationally and regionally across the U.S. Furthermore, the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA's) estimates that by 2035 the projected supply will not meet the demand of geriatricians in both metro and rural regions of the U.S. with rural locales

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. International Database (IDB). Accessed August 23, 2023. https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb/#/pop?COUNTRY_YEAR=2023&COUNTRY_YR_ANIM=2023&FIPS_SINGLE=US&FIPS=US&popPages=BYAGE&POP_YEARS=2023,2060&menu=popViz&ageGroup=0

² Fried LP & Hall WJ. Leading on Behalf of an Aging Society. *J Am Geriatr.* 2008;56(10):1791-1795. [doi:10.1111/j.1532-5415.2008.01939.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.2008.01939.x)

likely to be hit harder where the percent adequacy of supply of geriatricians is projected to be 46 percent.³ Rural populations have more limited access to primary care physicians than residents of urban areas, and generally are older, have a higher incidence of poor health, and face greater socioeconomic barriers to receiving care (e.g., transportation, internet access). These barriers, in addition to systemic inequities, impact the health status of underserved communities.

The AGS has long advocated for creating a healthcare workforce with the skills and competence to meet the unique healthcare needs of older adults while also addressing the growing shortage of primary care providers and geriatrics health professionals. According to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a geriatrics competent workforce will contribute to higher quality, safer, and more cost-effective care for patients.⁴ Further, MedPAC's 2010 report stated that institutions using Medicare dollars to support graduate medical education (GME) should be providing training to enable health professionals to develop competency in the care of older adults. As we live longer, access to a geriatrics-trained workforce will be key to ensuring we can contribute to our communities for as long as possible.

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We appreciate all that you are doing to support and expand the healthcare workforce particularly in rural and underserved communities. Thank you for your leadership on this important legislation and we look forward to working with you on this issue moving forward. For additional information or if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact, Anna Kim at akim@americangeriatrics.org.

Sincerely,



Donna M. Fick, PhD, GCNS-BC, AGSF, FGSA, FAAN
President



Nancy E. Lundebjerg, MPA
Chief Executive Officer

³ Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. Health Workforce Projections. Accessed August 22, 2023. <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/workforce-projections>.

⁴ Institute of Medicine. *Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce*. Washington, DC. The National Academies Press; 2008. [doi:10.17226/12089](https://doi.org/10.17226/12089)