

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Subcommittee on Labor-HHS-Education
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor-HHS-Education
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Murray and Ranking Member Blunt:

As you begin work on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill, we urge your support for up to \$50 million for the Pediatric Subspecialty Loan Repayment Program (PSLRP), recently reauthorized in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020. This funding would allow the PSLRP to be able to provide loan repayment for pediatric subspecialists and child mental health professionals who care for children in underserved areas and could begin to address critical shortages of these highly trained professionals.

Severe shortages of pediatric medical subspecialists, pediatric surgical specialists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, and other pediatric mental health professionals are impeding access to care for children and adolescents. In many states, families must drive long distances, sometimes as far as hundreds of miles, for children to get the specialized care that they need. Even families who are able to travel such long distances to receive care often face long wait times because these professionals see so many children from across large geographic areas.

These shortages existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic placed major strain on our health care system, but now children are facing a mental health crisis further exacerbated by the pandemic. Many children are experiencing disruptions in their daily lives, isolation from peers and supportive adults, loss of family members from COVID-19, and increased family stress, all of which can impact mental health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently published data showing that the proportion of child emergency department visits for mental health reasons increased 24 percent for children aged five to 11 and 31 percent for children 12 to 17, last year. Unfortunately, there are too few child mental health professionals to care for these children, as evidenced by documented shortages of child and adolescent psychiatrists in every state.

An initial investment of up to \$50 million in the coming year would allow the Health Resources and Services Administration to implement this program and begin to address subspecialty and child mental health shortages in communities nationwide. The PSLRP would provide qualifying child health professionals with up to \$35,000 in loan repayment annually in exchange for caring for children in an underserved area for at least two years. This targeted financial support would help address high medical school or other graduate school debt that serve as a barrier to training in pediatric medical, surgical, and mental health subspecialties. Such relief would also help address underlying economic factors that are driving subspecialty shortages and ultimately ensure that children can access the care they need.

Reauthorization of this important program last year in the CARES Act was only the first step in supporting access to pediatric medical and mental health care. Without a federal investment in the pediatric subspecialty workforce, children will continue to face long wait times for subspecialty care, need to travel long distances to receive that care, or go without care altogether. Thank you for your support of the reauthorization and for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,