

April XX 2021

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chair
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health, Human Services, and Education
United States House of Representatives
2358-B Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Tom Cole
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health, Human Services and
Education
United States House of Representatives
2358-B Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair DeLauro, and Ranking Member Cole:

As you begin work on the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2022, we ask that you consider **\$50 million in funding for the Pediatric Subspecialty Loan Repayment Program** (PSLRP, Section 775 of the Public Health Service Act).

When children have consistent access to coverage and care, health outcomes are better, and costs to both the patient and system are lower.¹ Ideally, children requiring specialized care should have access to the care they need close to their communities, but this is often not the case. Millions of children reside 1.5 hours or more from access to needed specialty care.²

This distance can be a significant barrier for children with chronic conditions or behavioral health needs. Severe shortages of developmental-behavioral pediatricians, for example, result in children waiting an average of 5-6 months for the autism testing and diagnosis needed to be able to receive important early intervention services. This testing and diagnosis is not as effective or efficient via telehealth and therefore the pandemic has been increasing already long appointment wait times. Delaying care can result in delayed diagnosis, delayed treatment and intervention, and potentially harmful consequences.

¹ <https://khn.org/morning-breakout/the-cost-of-unwarranted-er-visits-32-billion-a-year/>

² Turner A, et al. "Comparison of Number and Geographic Distribution of Pediatric Subspecialists and Patient Proximity to Specialized Care in the US Between 2003 and 2019." *JAMA Pediatrics*. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.1124. Published online May 18, 2020.

To ensure that underserved and rural populations have access to the care they need, we need to incentivize specialty providers to practice in these communities. PSLRP provides qualifying child health professionals with up to \$35,000 in loan repayment annually in exchange for practicing in an underserved area for at least two years. This targeted financial support would help address high medical school debt that serves as a barrier to training in pediatric medical, surgical, and mental health subspecialties. Loan relief for pediatric subspecialty providers would help address underlying economic factors that are driving subspecialty shortages

Now is a crucial time to invest in the pediatric subspecialty and child mental health workforce. The pandemic has taken a toll, and we will likely be seeing the impact for years to come. Data suggest that the pandemic and its impacts have resulted in significantly higher rates of suicidal behavior in youth.³ This crisis has exacerbated existing concerns like job losses, food insecurity, and more and children who have suffered socially and emotionally will benefit from better access to pediatric mental health providers.

Congress rightly recognized the importance of addressing critical health care workforce issues in the CARES Act by reauthorizing several of the Title VII Health Professions Programs administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), notably including the PSLRP. An initial investment of \$50 million in the coming year would allow HRSA to implement this program and begin to address subspecialty and child mental health shortages in communities nationwide.

Thank you for your consideration of this vital investment in child mental and physical health. Ensuring that children in rural and underserved communities have access to care will only strengthen our nation.

Sincerely,

Kim Schrier, M.D.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

John Joyce, M.D.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

³ Hill RM, et al. "Suicide Ideation and Attempts in a Pediatric Emergency Department Before and During COVID-19." *Pediatrics*. December 2020, e2020029280; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-029280>.