

July 24, 2023

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Sanders:

On behalf of our 159,000 members, the American Dental Association (ADA) would like to thank you for introducing the Primary Care and Health Workforce Expansion Act. Among other provisions, the bill would reauthorize funding for:

- State oral health workforce grants;
- Oral Health Training Programs;
- National Health Service Corps (NHSC);
- Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education (THCGME); and
- Community health centers.

The state oral health workforce grants, NHSC, teaching health centers, and community health centers are important programs that support dentists and other oral health professionals providing care to those in underserved and rural communities. The Oral Health Training Program grants are also crucial tools for enhancing access to dental health services by increasing the number of oral health care providers, especially those working in underserved areas, and improving training programs for oral healthcare providers. ADA also strongly supports portions of the Oral Health Training Program that fund dental faculty loan repayment.

The bill also establishes a pilot program supporting community-based training of dental students at federally qualified health centers, tribal health centers, or rural health centers. The ADA supports the intent of this pilot program to train dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants in communities where there is the greatest need for an expanded dental workforce. However, programs for existing, widely accredited dental professions should be prioritized rather than diverting very limited training funds for expensive new programs that have not proven effective at improving oral health or increasing access to care.

Beyond these important programs, the ADA would like to share a few other legislative and policy initiatives that we believe are key to supporting the current dental workforce and would further encourage dental professionals to provide oral care to those who cannot easily access to those services currently.

Recent surveys of dental graduates show that the average new dentist graduates with over \$300,000 in student debt. This high debt burden restricts dentists' ability to work in underserved areas and with low-income patients. The ADA supports the following proposals to address the student debt burden of dentists and other health care professionals:

Permitting federal graduate student loans to be refinanced more than once

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- The ADA urges Congress to allow student loan borrowers to modify the interest rate on student loans to the current applicable rate, with that interest rate fixed for the life of the loan unless the borrower elects to modify it again.

S. 704, Resident Education Deferred Interest (REDI) Act

- This bipartisan bill would allow borrowers to qualify for interest-free deferment on their student loans while serving in a medical or dental internship or residency program. For many dental students and especially for those seeking to enter a specialty such as pediatric, public health or oral surgery, the savings from interest deferral could mean tens of thousands of dollars. Those kinds of savings could allow a new dental graduate to feel more comfortable pursuing an early career in underserved areas through public health programs or could be down payment for a small business dental practice in a rural community.

If you have any questions, please contact Chris Tampio at tampioc@ada.org, or at 202-789-5178.

Sincerely,

George R. Shepley, D.D.S.
President

Raymond A. Cohlma, D.D.S.
Executive Director

GRS:RAC:ct

cc: Senate HELP Committee Members