

Partnership for Primary Care Workforce

July 12, 2011

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Vice President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President and Mr. Vice President:

On behalf of the undersigned members of the Partnership for Primary Care Workforce (PPCW), we are writing to ask that as you proceed with your work on deficit reduction in the days ahead, you consider the importance of supporting and enhancing the primary care workforce in order to ensure access to quality and cost-effective health care for all Americans.

PPCW is a non-partisan, nationwide effort by professional, provider, and educational organizations to strengthen the nation's primary care workforce, particularly through the recruitment and retention of health professionals. We recognize the importance of taking steps to address our nation's deficit. However, we strongly believe the importance of investing in primary care to reign in health care costs and improve health outcomes for Americans cannot be overlooked.

Research by many has demonstrated that access to primary care lowers costs and improves health status and is particularly evident when care is delivered in a team-based Patient Centered Medical Home (PCMH). For example, findings from the Dartmouth Health Atlas Data demonstrate strong correlations between having more primary care, and lower Medicare costs and reduced ambulatory care-sensitive hospitalizations. There also is growing evidence that PCMH and Accountable Care Organizations (ACO) models – especially those emphasizing access to more robust primary care teams – can reduce total medical expenditures by 7-10 percent, largely by reducing avoidable hospitalizations and emergency room visits. While many provisions within the Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148 and P.L. 111-152) are credited with encouraging careers in primary care among medical school graduates, maintaining support for these and other initiatives that promote primary care is essential to ensuring the nation has the workforce to meet today's and future primary care demands. To that end, we believe it is imperative to: (1) continue support for key primary care workforce programs administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) within the Department of Health and Human Services; (2) sustain federal support for all Graduate Medical Education (GME) programs; and (3) improve the valuation of primary care services in the current payment system.

Primary Care Workforce Programs

As you know, HRSA administers a number of programs that promote and support primary care workforce development. PPCW supports continued funding for key HRSA programs that respond to our nation's primary care workforce needs. Specifically, PPCW supports the NHSC Scholarship and Loan Repayment programs as they invest in primary care professionals who commit to deliver care in underserved areas and are widely recognized as highly-successful programs. PPCW further supports the health professions programs authorized in Title VII of the Public Health Service Act, which promote the education and training of primary care providers with an emphasis on the recruitment of individuals

from underrepresented minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. Key advisory bodies and entities – including the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Institute of Medicine, the Congressional Research Service (CRS), and the Council on Graduate Medical Education (COGME) – have described the Title VII programs as both effective and undervalued. We concur with these findings and believe that support for these programs is essential.

Graduate Medical Education (GME)

There are three major sources of federal funding for GME that require sustained investment in order to assure continued patient access to primary care physicians: Medicare GME, Children’s Hospital GME, and Teaching Health Center GME. When Congress established Medicare in 1965, it recognized the societal benefits provided by teaching hospitals. As a result, it created the Medicare GME program to support the training of our nation’s residents to provide care to Medicare beneficiaries. Medicare GME has been a national success story in producing well-trained physicians for the U.S. population but nonetheless is vulnerable to inappropriate funding cuts. Additionally, children’s hospitals (which receive very limited Medicare support) rely on the Children’s Hospital GME program, which supports the training of approximately 40% of all general pediatricians and pediatric specialists, with nearly 60% of those trained entering general pediatrics. The Teaching Health Center GME program supports primary care residency training in community health centers and other ambulatory primary care settings, consistent with recommendations by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) and other advisory bodies to promote opportunities for community-based training. All three GME programs are critical to maintaining patients’ access to primary care physicians and provide a high return on the federal investment.

Payment Policy

The undervaluation of primary care within current payment systems has been identified by the GAO as a major factor that can discourage the selection of a career in primary care. MedPAC also has called for broad payment changes to promote primary care. PPCW strongly believes that creating and promoting public and private payment systems that compensate providers for preventive health care services, manage patients’ overall health, and that promote continuous and comprehensive care is vital to improving access to primary care services.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of our recommendations and look forward to working with you to strengthen and support the requisite primary care workforce to ensure access to quality health care for all Americans.

Sincerely,

The American Academy of Family Physicians
The American College of Physicians
The Association of Departments of Family Medicine
The Association of Family Medicine Residency Directors
The Association of Minority Health Professions Schools
The National Area Health Education Center Organization
The North American Primary Care Research Group
The Society of Teachers of Family Medicine