

NACNHSC Recommendations for the HHS Strategic Plan for Health Workforce Coordination

Section 3402 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act charges the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to, “develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan with respect to the health care workforce development programs of the Department”. The plan shall include: performance measures, the identification of gaps between outcomes and projected healthcare workforce needs as well as actions for addressing these gaps, and the identification of any barriers to implementing these actions. HHS has charged the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to lead plan development efforts. HRSA convened chairs of its five Bureau of Health Workforce (BHW) council and committee chairs on November 3, 2020 to discuss the plan and HHS’s needs for expert input.

BHW councils include the National Advisory Council for the National Health Service Corps (NACNHSC). NACNHSC is a group of healthcare providers and administrators who are experts in the issues faced by communities with a shortage of primary care professionals. The Council serves as a key source of information to the NHSC senior management, to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and, by designation, the Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

(NACNHSC) convened on November 5, 2020. On behalf of the NACNHSC, the Council appreciates the invitation to contribute to the BHW Strategic Plan for Section 3402. The Council is enthusiastic about future opportunities to collaborate with other BHW councils. The meeting agenda included discussion of Council’s recommendations for the strategic plan. Council Chair Dr. Keisha Callins described the purpose of the plan and the framework discussed during the BHW Chair meeting, and invited commentary from the Council, to be submitted to HRSA.

The Council provided the following recommendations for strategic plan development:

Workforce Support and Training

The COVID-19 pandemic that has affected more than 1 million Americans began during an existing healthcare provider shortage. More than 80 million American did not have access to adequate primary medical care prior to the onset of the pandemic. This situation has taxed workforce capacity and providers' well-being. The strategic plan should include approaches for:

- Preventing healthcare provider burnout and supporting resilience. Strategies should address needs of providers from multiple disciplines. Providers should have platforms that encourage collaboration between health research centers to explore how clinical practice in medically underserved communities impacts healthcare providers' resilience and wellbeing.
- Ensuring the workforce is trained adequately to deliver telehealth services, guidance on which services are compatible with telehealth, and building infrastructure to increase patient and provider utilization of tele-mental health services. Telehealth has emerged as a critical tool during the pandemic, and continues to be an effective strategy for overcoming barriers to care.
- Preparing the workforce to deliver interdisciplinary team based care which is a critical strategy for optimizing patients' health outcomes and addressing social determinants of health.

Address Needs for Comprehensive Healthcare Services

- The plan should support programs with a focus on training a culturally competent health care workforce adequately prepared to meet the unique needs of rural and underserved communities.

- Education and training plans should emphasize mentoring to support recruitment and retention of the health care workforce.
- Implement strategies that promote exposure to communities of practice in preparing healthcare providers to serve.
- The plan should include strategies for ensuring equity to maternal care. Strategies may include expanding scope of practice for providers and regulatory flexibility to support coordination between local care providers and providers based in the nearest hospital, or telehealth services where appropriate.
- The plan should include strategies for ensuring access to adequate behavioral healthcare for rural and underserved communities. Strategies may include allowing continued use of telehealth for service delivery, and training primary care providers to deliver medication-assisted treatment for substance use disorder, including opioid use disorder.

Modernize Healthcare Delivery and Provider Training Regulations

- The plan should recognize the value of new technology, such as telehealth, for increasing workforce effectiveness and efficiency. The plan should include considerations for updating policies and regulations to optimize use of technology for healthcare services delivery and coordination.
- Program and policy planning should be developed using evidence based research obtained through primary data collection and appropriate literature review.
- The plan should support research that demonstrates unique characteristics of vulnerable populations which should be analyzed when developing best practices to serve these communities.