

NACNHSC

National Advisory Council on the National Health Service Corps

Charmaine Chan, DO
Chair

Diane Fabiyi-King
Designated Federal Official

Dear Secretary Becerra,

We, the National Advisory Council on the National Health Service Corps (NACNHSC), are writing to recommend that \$790 million be appropriated for the fiscal year (FY) 2024 National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Loan Repayment and Scholarship Programs. This investment will maintain the recent success of the program and ensure recruitment and retention of highly qualified primary care clinicians working in areas of greatest need across the country. Furthermore, we recommend that funding be increased annually throughout the authorization of the NHSC to meet the dire need for primary care professionals.

The NHSC is a critical resource for addressing primary care service needs and urgent public health issues throughout the nation. In response to COVID-19, Congress provided the NHSC with supplemental funding to increase the number of awards dramatically and rapidly, leading to an immediate uptick in clinicians in the field to fill the gaps created by the pandemic.

Currently, the NHSC has over 20,000 health care professionals dedicated to caring for underserved communities and specifically addressing the needs of the U.S. primary health care workforce. A lack of adequate appropriations would adversely impact the successes already experienced through the program. After September 30, 2023, it is anticipated that the program's field strength will be reduced by 6,000 clinicians, resulting in approximately 6 million underserved people losing access to primary care services. Furthermore, the nation anticipates facing a primary care workforce shortage by 2035, especially in areas of highest need, and that shortage is projected to grow as the demand for health care professionals outpaces supply.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the entrenched disparities and gaps in health care that Americans face. The pandemic also demonstrated that primary care professionals were exceptionally well positioned during a public health crisis, providing not only medical services but helping individuals and their communities rebound, rebuild, and navigate their way to a new normal over the long term. Rural communities, in particular, rely on the primary care workforce as a safety net in the absence of stable health care services.

Since the NHSC began just over 50 years ago, it has helped approximately 70,000 primary care medical, dental, and behavioral health professionals complete their training through scholarships and loan repayment, meeting the needs of millions of people in approximately 21,000 sites that do not have enough health care professionals. Eighty-three percent of NHSC alumni who completed service between FY 2012 and FY 2021 have continued to care for underserved communities without a required service obligation.² The program has a long track record of supporting applicants who might not otherwise pursue careers in primary care. Notably, the NHSC field population is more racially and ethnically diverse than the national health care workforce.³

NHSC members provide care in federally qualified health centers, rural health clinics, school-based clinics, community mental health centers, critical access hospitals, substance use disorder treatment centers, and other settings. The NHSC supports an interdisciplinary

approach to provide comprehensive, integrated care—an approach that improves health outcomes and reduces overall health care costs, as borne out by Council members’ extensive professional experience serving rural and urban communities.⁴⁻⁶ Throughout its 50 years, the NHSC has placed tens of thousands of health care professionals across our country and its territories in an effort to counter the geographic maldistribution of the U.S. health care workforce.

Continued, sustained investment in the NHSC to recruit and retain primary care professionals is crucial to meeting the workforce demand. Increasing funding for the NHSC is a proven, effective method to rapidly expand primary care in the United States and nurture a comprehensive system of primary care in underserved areas. With adequate funding for this essential program, HRSA can continue to build and support sustainable systems of health care delivery in underserved areas by:

- investing in recruiting and retaining primary care professionals;
- supporting the growth and development of the comprehensive primary care workforce;
- increasing opportunities for health professions students to train in facilities such as teaching health centers to better prepare them to serve in the health care delivery environment; and
- investing in efforts to enhance the resilience and well-being of health care professionals.

The NACNHSC recommends that HHS urge Congress to appropriate \$790 million to fund the FY 2024 NHSC Loan Repayment and Scholarship Programs. This investment will ensure that the NHSC can continue to support training for and sustain the country’s primary health care workforce in responding to the unmet health care needs across the country.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of this request.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/Charmaine Chan
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Chair, NACNHSC

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About the NACNHSC

NACNHSC is made up of primary health care professionals and administrators who are experts in the issues faced by communities with a shortage of primary care. The Council serves as a key source of information to the NHSC, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and, by designation, the Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration. More details about the achievements of the NHSC and the goals of the Council can be found in the report [The National Health Service Corps at 50: Accomplishments, Adaptations, and Aspirations](#).

References

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