

March 17, 2023

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's request for information on the needs of the healthcare workforce and applauds your effort to create and implement innovative, sustainable, and inclusive policies. AACN is the national voice of academic nursing, representing more than 865 schools of nursing across the country. Our member schools educate more than 565,000 students and employ more than 52,000 faculty. Collectively, these institutions graduate registered nurses (RN), advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), educators, researchers, scientists, and frontline providers. Our member schools are committed to preparing a highly educated nursing workforce, strengthening the foundation of nursing science, and advancing innovative and equitable solutions to meeting the nation's healthcare needs.

From the classroom to the bedside, we know first-hand how critical a well-educated nursing workforce is to providing high-quality health care. As the Committee looks at possible solutions following February's hearing on the healthcare workforce, AACN strongly encourages the following priorities be included in any final proposal.

- **Invest in nursing education: Support and advance the Future Advancement of Academic Nursing (FAAN) Act when it is reintroduced.**
- **Continue support for at least \$530 million for Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024.**
- **Support mental health programs for nursing students and the workforce.**
- **Recognize the nexus between higher education and health care by sustaining and preserving student loan programs, including the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program, Pell Grants, Perkins Loan Program, and the Graduate PLUS Loan.**
- **Ensure nursing is represented on every federal taskforce, committee, and council that addresses the healthcare needs of the patients and communities.**
- **Transform research and data collection, including support of at least \$210 million for the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR) in FY 2024.**

For more information on these solutions and priorities see additional details below.

Invest in Nursing Education: Support and Advance the Future Advancement of Academic Nursing (FAAN) Act when it is Reintroduced.

While the COVID-19 public health emergency is set to expire on May 11, 2023, we continue to see the impact the last few years have had on the viability of nursing schools and the pipeline of faculty and students. While student enrollment in entry-level baccalaureate nursing programs increased by 3.3% in 2021, this increase was 2.3% lower than 2020.¹ Further, nursing schools saw enrollment decline in baccalaureate degree-completion programs and graduate programs at the master's and PhD levels.² Declines in graduate nursing programs are of great concern, as these programs help prepare individuals for critical roles in administration, teaching, research, informatics, and direct patient care. There are currently more than 2,100 full-time faculty vacancies in baccalaureate and/or graduate programs across the country, which limits the ability of nursing schools to maintain student capacity.³ This further illustrates how vital federal investments are to ensure that nurses are there to meet the healthcare needs of all communities, including those in rural, urban, and underserved areas.

The FAAN Act helps address those needs with immediate infrastructure support and providing a proactive approach to meeting future workforce demands as well. Enrolling and retaining under-represented students and nursing faculty to expand clinical education opportunities and modernizing nursing education programs will ensure the next generation of nurse leaders are available to meet the nation's healthcare demands. AACN strongly urges inclusion of the FAAN Act in any proposal put forward by the Committee.

Continue Support for the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs

Educational pathways are just one piece of the puzzle. Strong and historic investments in the current nursing workforce are imperative, especially as we contend with an aging nursing workforce and the toll that the response to COVID-19 has had on the profession. In fact, the median age of RNs is now 52 years, with nurses aged 65 and older making up 19% of the workforce.⁴ More than one-fifth of all nurses reported they plan to retire from nursing over the next five years.⁵ This need is only expected to intensify with the Bureau of Labor Statistics projecting the demand for RNs to increase by 6% through 2031, representing the need for an additional 195,400 jobs.⁶ Demand for certain APRNs (nurse practitioners, certified registered nurse anesthetists, and certified nurse-midwives) is expected to grow even more, by 40%.⁷

That is why continued support in Nursing Workforce Development programs (Title VIII of the Public Health Service Act [42 U.S.C. 296 et seq.] programs is critical. AACN appreciates the Committee's bipartisan work to ensure these programs, comprising the largest dedicated federal funding source for nursing, were reauthorized in the CARES Act. Now that these programs are reauthorized, they need to be fully funded. AACN urges Congress to provide at least \$530 million for the Nursing Workforce Development Programs in Fiscal Year 2024.

¹ American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2022) Nursing Schools See Enrollment Increases in Entry-Level Programs, Signaling Strong Interest in Nursing Careers. Retrieved from: <https://www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Press-Releases/View/ArticleId/25183/Nursing-Schools-See-Enrollment-Increases-in-Entry-Level-Programs>

² Ibid

³ American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2022). [Special Survey on Vacant Faculty Positions](https://www.aacnnursing.org/Portals/42/News/Surveys-Data/2022-Faculty-Vacancy-Report.pdf). Retrieved from: <https://www.aacnnursing.org/Portals/42/News/Surveys-Data/2022-Faculty-Vacancy-Report.pdf>

⁴ National Council of State Boards of Nursing and the National Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers (2021) The 2020 National Nursing Workforce Survey. Retrieved from: [https://www.journalofnursingregulation.com/article/S2155-8256\(21\)00027-2/fulltext](https://www.journalofnursingregulation.com/article/S2155-8256(21)00027-2/fulltext)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). Occupational Outlook Handbook-Registered Nurses. Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/registered-nurses.htm>

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). Occupational Outlook Handbook-Nurse Anesthetists, Nurse Midwives, and Nurse Practitioners. Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/nurse-anesthetists-nurse-midwives-and-nurse-practitioners.htm>

Support Mental Health Programs for Nursing Students and the Workforce

The mental health needs of our nation continue to be a top issue, especially during this public health emergency. As highlighted in a recent survey published in *Nurse Educator*, nearly a quarter of graduate nursing students reported elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression over the past year.⁸ This statistic is becoming all too familiar as another study of college students found that “39 percent have symptoms of major depression, 66 percent are battling loneliness, and 13 percent have seriously considered suicide.”⁹ We appreciate additional investments in the American Rescue Plan Act to support mental health for patients, students, and practitioners, but more must be done. As the Committee considers additional policies designed to increase access to mental health and other services, AACN strongly encourages the Committee to explicitly include nursing students, faculty, and clinicians, including psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioners, in any policy efforts.

Sustain Essential Student Loan Programs

Affordable higher education is critical for the success of the student, their family, the community, the economy, and innovation. Sustaining and preserving student loan programs, including the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program, Pell Grants, Perkins Loan Program, and the Graduate PLUS Loan help ensure accessibility for all students who wish to be a part of the future nursing workforce. In addition, students, including those preparing to be nurses, are financing their degrees with federal and private loans, and then facing debt upon graduation. We urge the committee to support existing programs and look at innovative loan repayment efforts to help alleviate the burden of student loan debt for our frontline healthcare workers, including nurses, so they can fully focus on patient care without worrying about financial hardship.

Engage Nurses in Policy Priorities, including Public Health Response Efforts

There were many lessons learned during this past pandemic, which present the Committee with an opportunity to be proactive and plan for tomorrow. To that end, we encourage the Committee to include nursing schools, faculty, and students in any policy priorities, including, but not limited to:

- Ensure nursing students and other health professional students are included in public health and other disaster preparedness efforts. For example, nursing students and other health professional students were authorized to administer COVID-19 vaccines due to an amendment the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) made to the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act Declaration. However, the current authorization under the PREP Act ends when the COVID-19 public health emergency declaration is lifted, which means the ability of nursing students to address future health threats would be limited. Passing legislation such as the Student Assisted Vaccination Effort (SAVE) Act, which has yet to be reintroduced this Congress, is a step to ensure we are maximizing our health care workforce resources.
- Ensure schools of nursing are eligible to receive awards to participate as Centers for Public Health Preparedness and Response and continue their extraordinary public health contributions in this capacity.
- Ensure a nurse educator or clinician is represented on every federal taskforce, committee, or council that addresses the healthcare needs of patients and the communities served.

⁸ Nurse Educator (2021). A Survey of Mental Health in Graduate Nursing Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from:

https://journals.lww.com/nurseeducatoronline/Abstract/2021/07000/A_Survey_of_Mental_Health_in_Graduate_Nursing.13.aspx

⁹ NBC News (2021). College Students Struggle with Mental Health Amid the Pandemic. Retrieved from:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/college-students-struggle-with-mental-health-amid-the-pandemic-110427717528>

- Ensure schools of nursing are included as eligible entities to receive any resources to identify, facilitate the development of, or disseminate best practices to address social determinants of health.

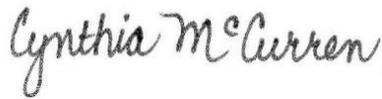
Transform Research and Data Collection

AACN recognizes that scientific research is essential to advancing evidence-based interventions, informs policy decisions, and sustains the health of the nation. From addressing ongoing healthcare disparities and working to cure cancer, to developing countless other groundbreaking discoveries, the work at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and by our nurse researchers and scientists at the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), is fundamental. Continued and increased investments in our research infrastructure are necessary to ensure we remain a global leader in cutting-edge innovations. Therefore, AACN urges Congress to provide at least \$210 million for NINR in FY 2024.

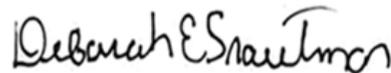
In addition, data collection and data sharing are especially crucial as we utilize today's technology to find tomorrow's cures. AACN recognizes the importance of data collection and is a proud partner of NIH's All of Us Research Program to help create the most diverse health research database in history.

We appreciate the Committee's bipartisan focus on how to best support the healthcare workforce, and our nursing schools, faculty, and students. As you continue to develop a path forward, AACN stands ready to serve as a resource and vital stakeholder to you and your staff. If AACN can be of any assistance, please contact AACN's Director of Government Affairs, Rachel Stevenson, at (202) 463-6930, ext. 271 or rstevenson@aacnnursing.org.

Sincerely,



Cynthia McCurren, PhD, RN
Board Chair



Deborah E. Trautman, PhD, RN, FAAN
President and Chief Executive Officer