

April 3, 2014

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chair, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jack Kingston
Chair, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Moran, Chairman Kingston, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

We write to you out of concern that the number of pediatric mental health specialists, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists today is inadequate to meet the growing health needs of America's children. We respectfully request that the Pediatric Subspecialty Loan Repayment program, Section 775 of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 295f), be recognized as a critical national priority and strongly urge Congress to provide it with \$5 million in funding in the FY 2015 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill.

There is not only a shortage but a significant disparity in the geographic distribution of pediatric subspecialists trained to treat children with special health care needs, resulting in many children in underserved areas not receiving timely or appropriate health care. Children and their families often face long waiting lists to see subspecialists or must travel long distances to find needed care. According to a 2012 survey conducted by the Children's Hospital Association, appointment wait times for certain pediatric subspecialty care far exceed the prevailing benchmark of two-weeks in children's hospitals. The survey showed that the average time for a developmental pediatric specialist is 14.5 weeks, 8.9 weeks for neurology, and 7.5 weeks for child and adolescent psychiatry. Children's hospitals also reported extended vacancies, 12 months or longer, for certain pediatric subspecialist positions, which contribute to the difficulty of accessing pediatric subspecialty care in a timely manner.¹ Wait times outside children's hospitals can be much longer. When timely access to pediatric specialty and subspecialty providers occurs, the result is better outcomes. Longer lag times between symptom onset, including mental illness, and treatment may not only result in poorer outcomes, but also in greater costs to patients and the health care system.

Shortages threaten to become more severe as fewer medical students choose careers in pediatric mental health care and pediatric subspecialties. At the same time, the mean age of pediatric subspecialists

exceeds 50 years.² There are three primary economic disincentives that discourage medical students from pursuing careers in pediatric subspecialties: 1) additional training beyond their primary training (2-3 years on average), 2) high loan debt due to longer training;³ and 3) average Medicaid reimbursement that is 30 percent less than Medicare.

The shortage of pediatric specialists is compounded by the growing number of children in the United States. In 2011, there were 73.9 million children in the United States, 1.5 million more than in 2000.⁴ This number is expected to grow to 101.6 million by 2050, increasing demand for pediatric health care services.

The Pediatric Subspecialty Loan Repayment program will help ameliorate shortages by providing a financial incentive for students to choose careers in pediatric mental health and pediatric subspecialties. Eligible participants must agree to work full-time for not less than two years in a pediatric medical subspecialty, a pediatric surgical specialty, or in child and adolescent mental and behavioral health in a health professional shortage area or a medically underserved area as determined by the Secretary. In return, the program will pay up to \$35,000 in loan repayment for each year of service, for a maximum of three years. The law authorizes \$30 million per year for loan repayments for pediatric medical specialists and pediatric surgical specialists and \$20 million for each year for loan repayments for child and adolescent mental and behavioral health professionals.

As you deliberate the Fiscal Year 2015 appropriations package, we strongly urge you to appropriate \$5 million within the Health Resources and Services Administration to provide initial funding for this program. Our nation desperately needs specialists specifically trained to treat the growing number of American children with serious physical and mental health conditions. It is vital that initial funding for this program be provided as soon as possible. Thank you for giving this request all appropriate consideration.

Sincerely,

AANS/CNS Section on Pediatric Neurological Surgery
Academic Pediatric Association
American Academy of Neurology
American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus
American Association of Neurological Surgeons
American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American College of Cardiology
American College of Rheumatology
American College of Surgeons
American Medical Association
American Osteopathic Association
American Pediatric Society
American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology

American Society of Pediatric Nephrology
American Society of Pediatric Neurosurgeons
American Society of Plastic Surgeons
American Thoracic Society
Arthritis Foundation
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs
Child Neurology Foundation
Child Neurology Society
Children's Hospital Association
Congress of Neurological Surgeons
Council on Pediatric Subspecialties
March of Dimes
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology, and Nutrition
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society
Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America
Scoliosis Research Society
Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine
Society for Pediatric Research
Society of Thoracic Surgeons
The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

¹ Children's Hospital Association. "Pediatric Specialist Physician Shortages Affect Access to Care." August 2012. <http://www.childrenshospitals.net/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Surveys&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=63293>.

² American Board of Pediatrics.

³ Frintner MP, Mulvey HJ, Pletcher BA, Olson LM. "Pediatric Resident Debt and Career Intentions." *Pediatrics*. 2013. Rochlin JM, Simon HK. "Does Fellowship Pay: What is the Long-Term Financial Impact of Subspecialty Training in Pediatrics?" *Pediatrics*. 2011 Feb;127(2):254-60.

⁴ Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, 2012. Available at: <http://childstats.gov/americaschildren/health.asp>