

# **Durbin, Rubio Introduce Bipartisan Bill To Expand Health Care Workforce With COVID-19 Pandemic**

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) today introduced bipartisan legislation to provide a historic investment in the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), Nurse Corps, and National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) programs to bolster health emergency surge capacity and restore the pipeline of physicians, nurses, and other health professionals to address health workforce shortages throughout our country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed health workforce shortfalls, while simultaneously imposing unprecedented strains on America's heroic frontline health professionals. A substantial barrier in meeting our nation's health workforce needs is the student debt associated with graduate health education—which can average more than \$200,000. COVID-19 has also magnified alarming racial and ethnic disparities in health

outcomes, which can be partially addressed by expanding the representation of minority populations working in health careers. In 2019, only 6.4 percent of doctors in America identified as Black or Latinx, despite Black and Latinx Americans accounting for 31 percent of the nation's total population.

Durbin and Rubio's legislation, *Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act*, would address these challenges and entice promising students from diverse backgrounds—physicians, dentists, mental health professionals, nurses, and physician assistants—into health careers in underserved communities by providing scholarship and loan repayment funding for tens of thousands of clinicians in exchange for a service commitment in an urban or rural area with a shortage of providers. The legislation would also create a new Emergency Service partnership between the NHSC and NDMS to boost our health care surge capacity in response to public health emergencies.

“Our health care heroes continue to sacrifice under dire conditions on the front lines of our pandemic response. COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for a national policy that increases the number of health workers to address shortages, medical disparities, and respond to emergencies. The *Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act* expands the NHSC, NDMS, and Nurse Corps programs, and I'm proud to partner with Senator Rubio to boost our care capacity, especially in underserved communities,” Durbin said.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant shortages in our emergency health response workforce, especially in underserved and minority communities,” Rubio said. “America's frontline workers have demonstrated tremendous heroism throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is time for Congress to step up and address the significant personnel shortages. The *Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act* would do just that by expanding the NHSC, NDMS, and Nurse Corps programs. I'm proud to join Senator Durbin in reintroducing this bipartisan bill, and I call on my colleagues in the Senate to swiftly pass it so that it can be sent to the House.”

The United States is projected to face a shortage of up to 120,000 doctors over the next decade, and the need for an estimated 200,000 new nurses for each of the next several years. Within these fields, there are significant shortages in both urban and rural communities as well as among specialties, including in primary care and behavioral health. COVID-19 has upended this equation, with providers being called back into service from retirement, fourth-year medical students being graduated early, and health professionals traveling across state lines to deliver care.

The NDMS is the nation's primary emergency health response workforce, which activates physicians, nurses, and other medical and public health personnel from private practices and deploys them to disaster locations as intermittent federal employees. A

recent [report](#) from the Government Accountability Office (GAO,) found that the NDMS does not have the planning in place to ensure a workforce capable of responding to nationwide or multiple concurrent health events, and that its workforce of emergency responders is only a fraction of its target amount.

Specifically, the *Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act* would expand the NHSC, NDMS, and Nurse Corps programs by:

*Emergency Surge Funding to Restore Workforce Pipeline:*

- Providing a one-time, supplemental appropriation of \$5 billion for scholarship and loan forgiveness awards through the NHSC, and \$1 billion through the Nurse Corps program;
- o Includes a 40 percent set-aside for racial/ethnic minorities and students from low-income urban/rural areas;

*Creation of Emergency Service Corps for Surge Capacity*

- Establishing a demonstration pilot to harness members of the NHSC workforce to serve in emergency capacities through the NDMS. This option would bolster loan repayment for health professionals while expanding our preparedness and surge capacity.
- Individuals serving in the NHSC or alumni who continue to practice in a health shortage area could concurrently serve in the NDMS and be available for rapid deployment for health emergencies, while receiving supplemental loan repayment awards to address their student debt.

The *Strengthening America's Health Care Readiness Act* is supported by the following organizations: American Medical Association, Association of Clinicians for the Underserved, Association of American Medical Colleges, National Association of Community Health Centers, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, American Dental Association, American Academy of Family Physicians; Physician Assistant Education Association, National Hispanic Medical Association, Council on Social Work Education, Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA), and the Illinois Primary Health Care Association (IPHCA).