

September 12, 2019

The Honorable Dick Durbin
United States Senate
711 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Durbin:

On behalf of the Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA) and its more than 200 hospitals and nearly 50 health systems, we are pleased to support the *Rural America Health Corps Act (S. 2406)*, which would help address workforce shortages in rural communities by establishing a targeted demonstration program under the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) program. Specifically, your legislation would provide \$25 million annually in years 2020 through 2024 to provide dedicated student loan funding for professionals who commit to serve in rural settings for five or more years, an increase over the current two-year period.

Rural hospitals face a unique set of circumstances, including geographic isolation, low patient volumes, and a challenging payer mix, which can make it more challenging to recruit and retain an adequate healthcare workforce. The NHSC program currently provides student loan forgiveness and other benefits to healthcare professionals who commit to serving in a healthcare professional shortage area (HPSA). However, of the 3,100 new loan forgiveness awards issued annually, only 30 percent of program participants serve in rural communities. IHA applauds your work to help increase the number of professionals serving in rural settings.

As we partner with you in support of S. 2406, we also want to highlight that, according to a 2018 report by the Congressional Research Service, less than one percent of NHSC participants are serving in Critical Access Hospitals. Therefore, in addition to supporting S. 2406 as written, IHA encourages your consideration of requiring the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue a report on how to increase the number of program participants who serve in rural hospital settings. In addition, we urge your consideration of allowing rural prospective payment system hospitals with 50 or fewer beds to be included as eligible sites under the demonstration program.

Again, thank you for your continued work to ensure all Illinoisans – no matter where they live or the circumstances in their lives – have the opportunity to reach their full potential for health. We look forward to working with you to advance this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A.J. Wilhelmi
President and CEO

1151 East Warrenville Rd.
P.O. Box 3015
Naperville, IL 60566
630.276.5400

700 South 2nd St.
Springfield, IL 62704
217.541.1150

400 North Capitol St. N.W.
Suite 585
Washington, DC 20001
630.276.5645

833 West Jackson Blvd.
Suite 610
Chicago, IL 60607
312.906.6150

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