

Increase Diversity in the Occupational Therapy Workforce

Support the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act: H.R. 3637/S. 2747

As Congress seeks ways to improve health care outcomes in our country, it should ensure that the health care workforce in the United States evolves to mirror the makeup of the population. The Institute of Medicine raised concerns about the diversity of the health care workforce in their 2004 study *In the Nation's Compelling Interest: Ensuring Diversity in the Health Care Workforce*. Racial and ethnic minorities largely receive lower quality health care than non-minorities. Overall, increasing diversity will lead to improved access to care, greater patient choice and satisfaction, and better education experience for health professions' students, among many other benefits.

Occupational therapy practitioners support the health and participation of clients through engagement in meaningful occupations (i.e., everyday activities). OTs and OTAs help clients who have experienced (or are at risk for experiencing) illness, injury, or disability to engage in their meaningful roles, habits, and routines, all of which are linked to their culture, background, and experience.

In addition to the reasons stated above, a more diverse health care workforce is important because:

- Patients who receive care from members of their own racial and ethnic background tend to have better outcomes, and
- Health professionals from underrepresented and minority backgrounds are more likely to practice in medically underserved areas.
- Minority groups disproportionately live in areas with provider shortages

Having a more diverse workforce will help close the gap on provider shortages, while improving the ability of the health care workforce to effectively address the health care needs of all Americans. Estimates show the burden of racial and ethnic health disparities will cost the United States \$363.1 billion a year in lost productivity and health care spending by 2050.

The bipartisan Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3637/S. 2747), introduced by Reps Bobby Rush (D-IL), Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), and Sens Casey and Murkowski, increases opportunities for individuals underrepresented in the professions of occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech-language pathology, and audiology (including students from racial and ethnic backgrounds) by providing grant funding to those professions' college and university programs.

This legislation provides the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) with the flexibility to adapt to changes to which groups are defined as "underrepresented" to reflect changes in the health care workforce. The funding proposed in this bill allows higher education programs for these professions to strengthen and expand the comprehensive use of evidence-based strategies shown to increase recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds. These strategies include outreach to the community, creating or expanding mentorship and tutoring programs, and providing scholarships and stipends to students.

This bi-partisan legislation moves our nation closer to the goal of a health care workforce that mirrors society. It would reduce shortages, lower costs, and increase the quality of our nation's health care.