



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
COLLEGES OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE

March 29, 2019

Dear Representative/Senator:

On behalf of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM), I write to congratulate you on your election and welcome you to the 116th Congress.

AACOM leads and advocates for the full continuum of osteopathic medical education to improve the health of the public. Founded in 1898 to support and assist the nation's osteopathic medical schools, AACOM represents all 35 accredited colleges of osteopathic medicine—educating nearly 31,000 future physicians, 25 percent of all U.S. medical students—at 55 teaching locations in 32 U.S. states, as well as osteopathic graduate medical education professionals and trainees at U.S. medical centers, hospitals, clinics, and health systems.

As you know, the U.S. health care system faces numerous challenges: ongoing transformation, a rapidly evolving and diverse patient population, and a physician workforce shortage that is projected to worsen over the coming years. As Congress continues its work, we stand ready to work with you to promote robust health care and higher education policies that bolster the nation's future physician workforce to ensure that Americans have access to high-quality health care.

Federal graduate medical education (GME) funding is critical to ensure the stability and continuity of both the nation's medical residency training programs that produce future physicians and the health care system that provides care to our country. As the number of osteopathic medical school graduates continue to grow, we urge Congress to champion health care policies that support the investment and preservation of GME funding. This includes lifting the statutory cap on Medicare-funded GME slots, and ensuring that policies impacting this funding are directly associated with health care workforce needs, particularly for programs that expand training in community-based settings.

Furthermore, we request that Congress fully support the Health Resources and Services Administration's Teaching Health Center (THC) GME Program. The THCGME Program is an innovative program that addresses the nation's primary care workforce shortage and expands training opportunities for future physicians by funding primary care medical and dental residents in high-need areas. Established in 2010 and reauthorized in 2015 and 2018, the THCGME Program has been an overwhelming success. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the program supported the training of 732 residents in 57 primary care residency programs, across 24 states. Importantly, physicians trained in THC programs are more likely to practice in underserved communities, increasing access to care for the country's most vulnerable patient populations. However, this program will expire on September 30. Continuation for this program is vital to address the primary care physician workforce shortage while delivering health care services to those most in need.

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Additionally, we ask Congress to recognize the importance of federal financial aid and loan repayment programs to medical students as you consider the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act* (HEA). It is critical that federal policies support a pathway for future physicians, especially for those who desire to go into public service. As you know, a majority of students entering medical school have already amassed high debt from their undergraduate education. Unlike other career paths, the high debt burden of pursuing a medical education is frequently compounded by years of post-graduate training. Due to the unique factors attributed to medical education and training, these students graduate with relatively high debt compared to other graduate students. This could also deter individuals from specializing in primary care.

Therefore, we request that Congress' graduate education priorities champion the sustainment and expansion of policies that support medical students towards the completion of their training to become licensed physicians. In particular, during HEA reauthorization negotiations, we ask that Congress maintain and preserve the current structure and eligibility of the Federal Direct Graduate PLUS Loan Program. These federal loans are available to medical and other graduate and professional students for up to the total cost of their education. Imposing any borrowing limits on these loans would seriously hurt medical students' ability to afford their education and further exacerbate the physician workforce shortage. Additionally, we ask that Congress preserve the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program during HEA negotiations, which supports medical students pursuing careers in public service to care for our nation's patients. We strongly support the reauthorization of the HEA, which provides a key opportunity to address these policies that will help alleviate the significant financial burdens of these students in training.

AACOM looks forward to working with you in the 116th Congress to continue building a robust health care and higher education system that will enable current medical students and future physicians to provide the necessary care to our nation's citizens. If you have any questions or wish to discuss these matters further, please contact Pamela Murphy, Senior Vice President of Government Relations, at pmurphy@aacom.org or (301) 908-2137.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "SC Shannon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Stephen C. Shannon, DO, MPH
President and CEO