



Virginia Rural Health Association

The leading voice for rural health in Virginia

June 1, 2020

The Honorable Mark Warner
United States Senate
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tim Kaine
United States Senate
231 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Warner and Kaine:

On behalf of the Virginia Rural Health Association (VRHA), I would like to urge you to support two bipartisan bills currently in Congress which are vital to healthcare in the state of Virginia and across the country.

We applaud the bipartisan efforts to improve healthcare delivery by means of the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act (S.3599) and the Conrad State 30 & Physician Access Reauthorization Act (S.948). Together, these bills serve to bolster our workforce, not only amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but well beyond it.

This bill would alleviate visa-based restrictions for international nurses and physicians who have trained in the United States, allowing these heroes to join the fight against the COVID-19 virus and diminish workforce shortages in rural America.

International medical graduates are more likely to practice in rural and underserved areas. The exact locations where they are desperately needed during this crisis. Overall, they account for nearly 25% of the physicians actively practicing in the USA.

Health care workforce shortages that have plagued rural communities for decades have become exacerbated by the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 77 percent of rural counties were designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), and while approximately 20 percent of the nation's population lives in rural areas, only 9 percent of US physicians practice in rural America. In Virginia, we have 247 HPSAs where over 2.2 million Virginians reside, representing nearly a quarter of the population of our state. The mal-distribution of healthcare resources disproportionately hampers the health and livelihood of rural Virginians.

The Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act (S.3599) would allow tens of thousands of nurses and physicians to join the fight against COVID-19 and address the significant health care workforce shortages in rural America by recapturing unused immigrant visas that Congress has previously authorized and allocating those visas to international doctors and nurses who have trained and are already working in the United States. These heroes could improve access to high quality health care services in rural communities and allow them to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and future health crises more effectively, and ultimately save lives.

The Conrad State 30 & Physician Access Reauthorization Act (S.948) would allow states to sponsor US-trained foreign physicians to work in medically underserved areas in exchange for a waiver of the physicians' two-year foreign residence requirement. It increases the base number of annual Conrad waivers available to each state from 30 to 35, with a demand-based sliding scale to determine the number of available waivers in future years, and includes a provision to address the current backlog in the system for physicians on immigrant visas who wish to acquire permanent residency status. This would help hospitals, clinics and group practices overcome some of the barriers to recruiting and retaining physicians, thereby, increasing health care access in rural America.

VRHA strongly supports both the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act (S.3599) and the Conrad State 30 & Physician Access Reauthorization Act (S.948). Both bills have enjoyed bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress, as improvements in our healthcare workforce and better healthcare access to underserved Americans is integral to the future of our country.

We urge you to co-sponsor both bills, thereby protecting rural health by working to bolster our workforce in these challenging times, while striving to improve rural healthcare access for the future. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. We would be grateful for your support for these crucial legislative efforts and becoming stalwart champions for rural America.

Sincerely:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Beth O'Connor', written in a cursive style.

Beth O'Connor, M. Ed.
Executive Director