

June 26, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

The undersigned organizations call on you to support public health professionals working nonstop to address the COVID-19 crisis across the nation. We strongly support the Strengthening the Public Health Workforce Act (S.3737), introduced by Senators Smith (D-MN) and Booker (D-NJ) and urge Congress to pass this bill as part of the next COVID-19 package and provide funding to implement it.

The public health workforce is the backbone of our nation's governmental public health system at the county, city, state, and tribal levels. These skilled professionals are the primary resource necessary to deliver public health programs and services: they lead efforts to ensure the tracking and surveillance of infectious disease outbreaks such as COVID-19, prepare for and respond to natural or man-made disasters, and ensure the safety of the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. Health departments employ full-time nurses, behavioral health staff, community health workers, environmental health workers, epidemiologists, health educators, nutritionists, lab workers and others who use their unique skill sets to do all they can to keep people in their communities healthy and safe. While the current COVID-19 outbreak has raised the profile of public health workers, they have a long track record of protecting our communities out of the spotlight, preventing illness and harm.

While the importance of these professionals cannot be understated, health departments across the country face significant workforce challenges to maintaining robust staffing levels and recruiting and retaining needed professionals. The public health workforce was hit hard by the Great Recession, and whereas much of the rest of the public sector workforce has recovered or grown, local and state health departments have not. In fact, local and state health departments have lost nearly a quarter (23%) of their workforce since 2008, shedding over 50,000 jobs across the country. The deficiency is compounded by the age of the public health workforce – nearly 55% of public health professionals are over the age of 45 and almost a quarter of health department staff are eligible for retirement. Between those who plan to retire and those who plan to pursue opportunities in the private sector (often due to low wages), nearly half of the local and state health department workforce might leave over the next several years. We need to do more to get the right people into these jobs and keep them there.

This is why the Public Health Workforce Loan Repayment Program authorized by S.3737 is so important. It will help incentivize new and recent graduates to join the governmental public health workforce, encourage them to stay in these roles, and strengthen the public health workforce as a whole. It would provide up to \$35,000 per year in loan repayment in exchange for a two-year commitment to this important work. New staff and volunteers are being brought into the field for the COVID-19 response. This program would provide an added incentive to keep them long term and help ensure that their experience is harnessed and available before the next crisis hits.

Thank you for your commitment to our nation's public health. We look forward to working with you to make the Public Health Workforce Loan Repayment Program a reality.

Please contact Eli Briggs, Senior Government Affairs Director at the National Association of County and City Health Officials, at ebriggs@naccho.org, with any questions.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

American Association for Clinical Chemistry

American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy

American Association on Health and Disability

American College of Clinical Pharmacy

American Dental Education Association

American Geriatrics Society

American Lung Association

American Public Health Association

American Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene

Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology

Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs

Association of Public Health Laboratories

Association of Public Health Nurses

Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions

Associations of Schools and Programs of Public Health

CAEAR Coalition

Coalition of National Health Education Organizations

Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists

Eta Sigma Gamma

Families USA

GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality

Lakeshore Foundation

NASTAD

National Association of County and City Health Officials

National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health

National Coalition of STD Directors
National Environmental Health Association (NEHA)
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National WIC Association
Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of Vital Strategies
Safe States Alliance
Prevention Institute
The AIDS Institute
The Gerontological Society of America
The Society for Public Health Education
Trust for America's Health
Vaccinate Your Family

State Organizations

Indiana

Indiana State Association of County and City Health Officials

Kentucky

Barren River District Health Department
Bourbon County Health Department
Estill County Health Department
Floyd County Health Department
Jessamine County Health Department
Kentucky Health Departments Association
Kentucky Public Health Association
Kentucky Rural Health Association
Lake Cumberland District Health Department
Powell County Health Department
Three Rivers District Health Department
Todd County Health Department

Whitley County Health Department

Michigan

Michigan Association for Local Public Health

Minnesota

Local Public Health Association of Minnesota

Maryland

Queen Anne's County Department of Health

University of Maryland School of Nursing

New York

New York State Association of County Health Officials

Oklahoma

Tulsa Health Department

cc:

The Honorable Richard Shelby

The Honorable Lamar Alexander

The Honorable Roy Blunt

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

The Honorable Patty Murray