



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS  
STRONG MEDICINE FOR AMERICA

December 24, 2008

The Honorable Barack Obama  
Office of the President-Elect  
451 Sixth Street, NW  
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President-Elect:

On behalf of the 93,300 members of the American Academy of Family Physicians, thank you for making a strong health care workforce a key component of your legislative agenda. We concur wholeheartedly with your platform that "(t)hrough training and reimbursement incentives, there must be a commitment to sufficient and well-qualified primary care physicians..." and ask that you consider including this priority in the upcoming economic stimulus legislation.

**Title VII – Training in Primary Care Medicine and Dentistry**

Both the Government Accountability Office and the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission have noted research indicating that access to primary care is associated with better health outcomes and lower health care costs. Yet we have seen a decline in U.S. health care professionals entering primary care. Title VII, Section 747, administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), is the only federal program aimed directly at training primary care physicians, dentists and physician assistants. On December 12, 2008, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a report entitled, *HHS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Charting a New Course for a Healthier America*, which points to the drastic decline in Title VII funding. The IOM describes HRSA's workforce training programs as "an undervalued asset."

Although our nation is facing a growing shortage of primary care physicians, annual appropriations for Section 747 of the Title VII Health Professions Grants Program have steadily eroded since 2003. Recognizing your steadfast commitment to increased funding for Title VII throughout your tenure in the Senate, AAFP urges you to include in the economic stimulus legislation a robust investment in the Title VII, Section 747 grant program.

**President**  
Ted Epperly, MD  
Boise, ID

**Board Chair**  
James D. King, MD  
Selmer, TN

**Vice Speaker**  
John S. Meigs, Jr., MD  
Centerville, AL

**Directors**  
David W. Avery, MD, *Vienna, WV*  
James Dearing, DO, *Phoenix, AZ*  
Roland A. Goertz, MD, *Waco, TX*  
Kenneth R. Bertka, MD, *Holland, OH*  
David A. Ellington, MD, *Lexington, VA*  
Glen R. Stream, MD, *Spokane, WA*

Jeffrey J. Cain, MD, *Denver, CO*  
Thomas Allen Felger, MD, *Granger, IN*  
George Wm. Shannon, MD, *Columbus, GA*  
Jason Dees, DO (New Physician Member), *New Albany, MS*  
Jennifer Bacani, MD (Resident Member), *Wichita, KS*  
Amy McIntyre (Student Member), *Cranston, RI*

**President-elect**  
Lori J. Heim, MD  
Vass, NC

**Speaker**  
Leah Raye Mabry, MD  
San Antonio, TX

**Executive Vice President**  
Douglas E. Henley, MD  
Leawood, KS



We support the recommendation of the HRSA Advisory Committee on Training in Primary Care Medicine and Dentistry of an annual appropriation at a minimum level of \$215 million for the Title VII, Section 747 grant program. Including that level of funding for primary care training in the stimulus bill would reinvigorate medical education, residency programs, as well as academic and faculty development in primary care to prepare physicians to support the patient centered medical home medical practice model.

### **National Health Service Corps**

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC), also administered by HRSA, is needed to increase the health care workforce committed to improving the health of the nation's underserved. The NHSC provides scholarship and loan repayment awards to primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, dentists, mental and behavioral health professionals, physician assistants, certified nurse-midwives, and dental hygienists. AAFP supports the work of the NHSC toward the goal of full funding for the training of the health workforce and zero disparities in health care and urges that you include \$150 million for the NHSC in the stimulus legislation.

### **Medical Student Debt Relief**

We commend you for indicating that loan forgiveness for health professions will be a part of health care reform plan. High medical student debt, averaging \$140,000 in 2007, is a significant hardship throughout the loan repayment period, particularly during the years of training in medical residency programs. The average first-year stipend for medical residents is less than \$45,000. The high debt burden that many medical graduates face may influence their career choices deterring some from practicing in underserved areas, starting a career in medical education or research, or entering primary care medicine.

An important mechanism for providing medical education debt relief is the federal student loan program's debt-to-income ratio for the economic hardship loan deferment known as the 20/220 pathway. We urge you to reinstate the 20/220 pathway permanently or provide an equivalent funding mechanism for loan deferments so that family medicine residents and others pursuing primary care specialties can continue to have an option to postpone loan payments, without facing financial penalties, during a crucial time in their training.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the importance of primary care workforce incentives to improving our health care system. Your staff can reach us through Kevin Burke, AAFP Director of Government Relations, in our Washington office at (202) 232-9033 or by electronic mail at [kburke@aafp.org](mailto:kburke@aafp.org).

Sincerely,

James D. King, MD, FFAFP  
Board Chair