

August 26, 2020

Members of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee  
Vermont State House  
115 State Street Montpelier, VT 05633

**Via Email**

Dear Senators:

We are writing to urge you to pass H.607, an act relating to increasing the supply of nurses and primary care providers in Vermont.

As you know, Vermont's rural health care system entered the current global pandemic struggling with significant workforce shortages. Prior to March, providers across our continuum were united in the effort to address this issue. The needs in the area of nursing and primary care were identified as particularly acute. The Rural Health Task Force spent considerable time evaluating this issue and crafting a series of recommendations that would support the development of our workforce. The task force recommendations include both short-term and long-term strategies to address these challenges.

The task force, particularly the workforce subcommittee, heard loud and clear from stakeholders that a major barrier to entry into nursing and primary care is the rising cost of education. The task force identified scholarship support as a priority action. H.607 is an important step in addressing the financial barriers that limit access to these critical professions. The full report can be found here:

<https://gmcboard.vermont.gov/sites/gmcb/files/documents/Rural%20Health%20Services%20Report-%20Workforce%20White%20Paper%20FINAL%201.23.20.pdf>

The pandemic has only exacerbated our shortage and highlights the need for a more robust workforce. COVID-19 has taxed our already overtaxed workforce, and we anticipate this will continue until an effective and widely available vaccine is ready. Our workforce continues to be on the front-lines day in and day out. Many of them have faced this virus head on taking care of Vermonters with COVID in hospitals, nursing homes, physician practices and at home. Providers have been cross trained in areas outside their normal areas of practice to ensure Vermonters could receive necessary care.

While we have not seen a tremendous number of cases to date in Vermont, every health care worker must continue to practice arduous safety and infection prevention measures to protect patients and themselves because they can be confronted with a flare up at any time. The sense of burn-out amongst providers is high. Many of our physicians, nurses and nursing assistants who managed large outbreaks of COVID are suffering lingering exhaustion and trauma. We have experienced severe and negative impacts on the availability of nursing staff in the few outbreaks Vermont has seen. In addition, providers are challenged to adequately staff in instances where staff need to quarantine because of a possible exposure to COVID, or illness, or because of travel to a restricted area, or the need to care for a child who is learning remotely. This pandemic will continue to exacerbate the workforce challenges faced by our rural health system for the foreseeable future.

Your support of H.607 will have a concrete and positive impact on the development of the nursing and primary care workforce in Vermont. Passage of this bill will provide meaningful assistance to ensure that we will have the providers we need to care for Vermonters once this crisis is over, and in the event of future public health emergencies.

Sincerely,

Devon Green  
VP, Government Relations  
Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems

Jill Mazza Olson  
Executive Director  
VNAs of Vermont

Laura Pelosi, on behalf of  
Vermont Health Care Association  
Bayada Home Health and Hospice

Jessa Barnard  
Executive Director  
Vermont Medical Society

Georgia J. Maheras  
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Stephanie Winters  
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Vermont Psychiatric Association  
Vermont Academy of Family Physicians  
American Academy of Pediatrics - Vermont  
Chapter

Susan Ridzon  
Executive Director  
HealthFirst Independent Practice Association

Virginia Renfrew, on behalf of  
Vermont Association of Naturopathic Physicians