

# Congress Must Invest in the Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP)

## Recommendation

As the national deals with an unprecedented pandemic that has disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, the AAMC is concerned that the draft Senate FY 2021 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (Labor-HHS) spending bill proposes to eliminate HCOP, which helps develop a diverse workforce to meet the unique needs of vulnerable communities in this and future public health crises. The AAMC and its members urge Congress to continue investing in a diverse health workforce by providing at least \$15 million for HCOP in FY 2021, matching the House-passed Labor-HHS bill.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

The Health Careers Opportunity Program, which is authorized under the Title VII Public Health Service Act and administered by the Health Resources Services Administration, helps develop a diverse health workforce by investing in K-16 health outreach, pipeline, and education programs through partnerships between health professions schools and community-based organizations.

Unfortunately, throughout our country, rural and other underserved communities continue to have health care access issues and socio-economic conditions that lead to health disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare these existing health inequities, taking a disproportionate toll on marginalized people and communities of color.

A diverse health care workforce improves access to care and patient satisfaction, helping address many of the health care inequities minority patients continue to face during this pandemic. Since it takes up to a decade to train a physician, we must start now to ensure a future physician workforce that is able to address the health inequities facing minority patients.

Studies show that pipeline programs, such as HCOP, increase the number of underrepresented students enrolling in health professions schools, lead to heightened awareness of factors contributing to health disparities, and attract health professionals more likely to treat underrepresented patients.<sup>2</sup> In academic year 2018-2019, nearly 4,000 students from disadvantaged backgrounds participated in HCOP, helping build a more culturally competent workforce that is prepared for any public health crisis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The AAMC (Association of American Medical Colleges) is a not-for-profit association dedicated to transforming health through medical education, health care, medical research, and community collaborations. Its members are all 155 accredited U.S. and 17 accredited Canadian medical schools; more than 400 teaching hospitals and health systems, including Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers; and more than 70 academic societies. Through these institutions and organizations, the AAMC leads and serves America's medical schools and teaching hospitals and their more than 179,000 full-time faculty members, 92,000 medical students, 140,000 resident physicians, and 60,000 graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in the biomedical sciences.

<sup>2</sup> <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0027968419300653?token=7DFCE7AE5AD4BD333361FBC8DFBACC8F1C74D3AB288F4E39AC209D4701E97C41AC8CB4DBBE8F0707116491A17F6C4E7F>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hrsa/about/budget/budget-justification-fy2021.pdf>