



May 23, 2011

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Boehner and Democratic Leader Pelosi:

On behalf of the National Association of Community Health Centers and the 23 million patients served nationwide by community health centers (CHCs); 150,000 full-time CHC staff; and countless volunteer board members; I am writing to express our opposition to H.R. 1216. I understand this legislation is scheduled for consideration by the House of Representatives this week. We are heartened that this bill does not seek to eliminate the program; however, we are concerned that any change to the funding model for the Teaching Health Centers (THC) program will undermine the legislation's two key policy goals: (1) cultivating and supporting the primary care workforce in order to reduce the current severe shortage of primary care providers, and (2) training physicians in the very settings where they will ultimately practice medicine and where they are most needed later in their careers.

As you know, H.R. 1216 would convert the mandatory THC program authorized under Section 5508 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA, P.L. 111-148) into an authorization of appropriations for FY2012-FY2015. Additionally, H.R. 1216 rescinds unobligated mandatory balances that are currently available to support the THC program. These changes will make it that much more difficult for the 11 current program participants – and future participants – to secure commitments from key stakeholders (such as teaching hospitals and their boards), apply for accreditation, and hire new faculty – among other key business decisions necessary to invest in and sustain residency training.

The Health Resources and Services Administration, the Association of American Medical Colleges, and other experts have concluded we will face a significant shortage of primary care physicians by 2020. While the number of primary care physicians practicing at CHCs grew 57 percent between 2000 and 2006, we estimate CHCs will need at least 15,000 additional primary care physicians and other providers to meet the current demand for services. There are a number of reasons for the projected physician shortage, including demographic factors such as the growth and aging of the United States population and retirement of many primary care physicians. We commend recent efforts by Congress to promote primary care, from the

authorization of the THC program to evaluation of the most appropriate way for the Medicare program to reimburse physicians. And indications from recent National Resident Matching Program results suggest the heightened emphasis on primary care is contributing to more medical school graduates pursuing residency training in family medicine and other primary care specialties.

Two advisory groups to the Congress – the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) and the Council on Graduate Medical Education (COGME) – among others have repeatedly called for the promotion of residency training outside of the hospital setting. MedPAC and COGME have cited the importance of physicians gaining practical experience in the settings they will ultimately practice medicine. Equally important, however, is training experience that leads to the next generation of physicians practicing in underserved areas, particularly in rural and frontier areas that struggle to recruit and retain a sufficient workforce. Research has shown that CHC-trained physicians, for example, are more than twice as likely as their non-CHC trained counterparts to work in an underserved area.

While funding for the THC program comes from the ACA, its policy goals are not new. Members of the House on both sides of the aisle have discussed the importance of primary care, specifically making sure that Americans have a routine source of care and that they are seen in the most cost-effective setting possible. We urge Members of the House to evaluate the policy merits of the THC program and its unique ability to promote the primary care workforce and ensure that physicians gain valuable training experience in community settings.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on H.R. 1216. We look forward to working with you to invest in our nation's primary care capacity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daniel R. Hawkins, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Daniel R. Hawkins, Jr.
Senior Vice President, Public Policy and Research

CC: The Honorable Eric Cantor, Majority Leader
The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Majority Whip
The Honorable Steny Hoyer, Democratic Whip
The Honorable Fred Upton, Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce
The Honorable Henry Waxman, Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce