

June 3, 2009

The Honorable Richard Durbin
United States Senate
309 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Doris Matsui
United States House of Representatives
222 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Durbin and Representative Matsui:

The undersigned organizations would like to commend you for introducing the Public Health Workforce Development Act of 2009 (S. 1143/H.R. 2620). This bill would incentivize the recruitment and retention of public health professionals at a time when we are facing critical public health workforce shortages.

From first responders to scientists searching for ways to prevent disease, our public health workforce is vital to protecting our nation's health and economy. But our public health workforce is in crisis. There is a serious shortage of public health workers with the expertise needed to meet the depth and breadth of the responsibilities they are expected to carry out—ranging from detecting and responding to disease outbreaks like the recent Influenza A H1N1 outbreak to providing immunizations to protecting our food and water supplies.

The U.S. has an estimated 50,000 fewer public health workers than it did 20 years ago. A 2007 survey by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) found that the state public health agency workforce is graying at a higher rate than the rest of the American workforce, and workforce shortages continue to persist in state health agencies. This workforce shortage could be exacerbated through retirements: twenty percent of the average state health agency's workforce will be eligible to retire within three years, and by 2012, over 50 percent of some state health agency workforces will be eligible to retire. Further, according to a 2005 Profile of Local Health Departments conducted by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), approximately 20 percent of local health department employees will be eligible for retirement by 2010.

To address these shortages, your legislation would establish a Public Health Workforce Scholarship Program, as well as a Public Health Workforce Loan Repayment Program. We are very supportive of these financial incentives for public health professionals who agree to serve for a specified period of time in a Federal, State, local or tribal public health agency or health center. As baby boomers retire, it is necessary to recruit and retain the next generation of public health professionals, and this bill is a positive step toward achieving that end. At the same time, it is essential that we retain the current health workforce. With that in mind, we are also pleased that your legislation authorizes the Secretary to make grants to, or enter into contracts with, accredited educational institutions to award scholarships to mid-career public health professionals for additional training. Especially as we examine options for expanding access to care through health reform, it is critical that we have a well-trained and robust health workforce,

and your legislation is a critical step necessary for recruitment and retention of public health workers.

Again, we want to commend your leadership and thank you for introducing this important public health legislation. We look forward to working with you on this and other important public health initiatives in the future.

Sincerely,

AIDS Institute
American College of Clinical Pharmacy
American Podiatric Medical Association
American Public Health Association
American Social Health Association
American Society for Microbiology
Association for Prevention Teaching and Research
Association of Minority Health Professions Schools
Association of Public Health Laboratories
Association of Schools of Public Health
Association of State and Territorial Directors of Nursing
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, University of Minnesota
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
Infectious Diseases Society of America
Joint Public Health Informatics Taskforce
National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Coalition of STD Directors
Partnership for Prevention
Society for Public Health Education
Trust for America's Health