

March 20, 2023

Submitted Via Electronic Mail to HealthWorkforceComments@help.senate.gov

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair, U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor
& Pensions Committee
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions Committee
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Chair Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

Thank you for your leadership on healthcare issues and the attention of the Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) Committee regarding healthcare workforce challenges. Vizient appreciates the opportunity to respond to your recent request for information (RFI) on the healthcare workforce in the wake of the Committee's February 16, 2023, hearing entitled "Examining Health Care Workforce Shortages: Where Do We Go From Here?" As you know, healthcare workforce challenges have become more acute as a result of the significant strains placed on healthcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vizient provides solutions and services that improve the delivery of high-value care by aligning cost, quality, and market performance for more than 60 percent of the nation's acute care providers, which includes 97 percent of the nation's academic medical centers and more than 25 percent of ambulatory providers. Vizient provides expertise, analytics, and advisory services, as well as a contract portfolio that represents more than \$130 billion in annual purchasing volume, to improve patient outcomes and lower costs. Headquartered in Irving, Texas, Vizient has offices throughout the United States.

Recommendations to Address Workforce Education, Training and Shortages

As the Committee is aware, the nation is facing a significant current and future shortage of critical healthcare workers. From doctors, to nurses, to allied health professionals, and non-clinical staff, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already strained healthcare workforce. In fact, staff shortages are so severe, many hospitals have reported having to close beds, operating rooms, and emergency departments. To ensure patient access to care, address health disparities, and prepare for the next public health crisis, we must invest in healthcare provider education and training and bolster our workforce.

With that in mind, Vizient would like to recognize the important initial investments that Congress made in support of the physician workforce by providing 1,000 new Medicare-supported Graduate Medical Education (GME) positions in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021* – the first increase of its kind in nearly twenty-five years. In addition, under the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023*, Congress provided support for an additional 200 Medicare-supported GME positions, with an appropriate prioritization for clinicians working in mental and behavioral health subspecialties. While we greatly appreciate those investments, more is needed to substantially increase the number of physicians. Further, additional investments are needed to support the healthcare workforce more broadly.

Children's Hospitals Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) program

The Children's Hospitals Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) program is a critical program that provides vital investment in strengthening the pediatric workforce and supporting access to specialized care for children. America's children and youth are caught in a worsening mental, emotional, and behavioral health crisis that has been exacerbated by the additional stresses from the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, [according to the CDC](#), the pandemic saw a particular spike in emergency room visits among young women for mental health related conditions. CHGME is a vital tool for training new, front-line healthcare providers to address the needs of children.

We are grateful for the inclusion of \$385 million for CHGME in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023*; however, consistent and reliable funding for the program is needed to help our pediatric patients now and into the future. **As you work to reauthorize CHGME, Vizient recommends increasing the authorization level to \$738 million for FY2024 and beyond.**

Safeguarding the Nursing Workforce

In addition to the need to train physicians, there is a clear need to train and support more nurses. Through the Vizient/American Association of Colleges of Nursing [Nurse Residency Program \(NRP\)TM](#), we work with nurses and healthcare professionals across the country to build essential competencies and resiliency for new nurses entering the workforce. The NRP is designed to help decrease the nurse turnover rate, improve decision-making skills, enhance clinical nursing leadership practices, and promote the incorporation of research-based evidence into practice. Those that go through NRP tend to have greater retention rates and are more fulfilled in their work.

However, while residency programs, such as NRP are vital, it is also important to support nursing education and recruitment efforts more broadly to ensure a supply of nurses from the classroom to the bedside. This effort should include supporting nurse educators, recruitment, and the reconditioning of nurse education institutions. **Vizient urges Congress to consider policies that would aid in the training of new nurses and help build a robust pipeline through nursing schools. For example, the *Future Advancement of Academic Nursing (FAAN) Act* is one measure that would support the future nursing workforce and strengthen nursing education pathways.**

Training Allied Health and Administrative Professionals

In addition to physicians and nurses, allied health professionals are also in short supply. In fact, 85 percent of healthcare facilities have [reported](#) shortages of allied health professionals, including radiologic technicians, physical therapists, laboratory technicians, and occupational therapists, among others. Shortages of allied health professionals can magnify shortages of other health professionals because the burden to complete their tasks can often shift to other professionals—such as physicians or nurses—with a broader, but overlapping, skillset. This results in task shifting, often prevents healthcare personnel from practicing at the top of their license and could impact access to care.

Vizient has [found](#) that shortages of other non-clinical workers compound health professional shortages by taking away time clinical healthcare workers can spend caring for patients. In fact, we found that by delegating more administrative tasks, clinicians were able to see up to an additional 836 patients each year, a substantial step in alleviating shortages.

Vizient encourages Congress to take steps to support the education of new allied health professionals and non-clinical professionals to ease these shortages, including by alleviating some of the administrative burdens on other health professionals.

Other Policies to Address Workforce Shortages

To respond to immediate and future healthcare staffing needs, Vizient supports and urges Congress to approve the following legislation:

- *Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act* (S. 1024/H.R. 2255, 117th Congress), which would expand access to unused visas for essential medical professionals to ensure skilled professionals are able to help meet the workforce needs of America's health systems;
- *Resident Physician Workforce Shortage Reduction Act* (S. 834/H.R. 2256, 117th Congress), which would make the necessary long-term investments in expanding our physician workforce by adding an additional 14,000 GME slots over seven years; and
- *Opioid Workforce Act* (S. 1438/H.R. 3441, 117th Congress), which would add an additional 1,000 GME slots for hospitals that have established approved programs in addiction medicine, addiction psychiatry or pain medicine.

Recommendations Related to Workforce Retention

Over the last several years, maintaining and supporting the healthcare workforce has been a persistent challenge for hospitals. Many healthcare professionals opted to retire or pursue career options outside of direct hospital employment, including joining nurse staffing agencies. Further, hospitals have been impacted by workforce challenges for their nonclinical employees, who have indicated they can find less demanding, less restrictive and potentially more highly compensated positions in other lines of work. In response, hospitals have increased salaries and benefits, offered more flexible working arrangements and provided additional incentives to maintain existing staff.

While serious long-term challenges remain, Vizient applauds Congress for its work to support healthcare workers, including the bipartisan passage of the *Dr. Lorna Breen Provider Protection Act* last Congress, which bolsters resources to support clinical workforce resilience and mental health. To build on this critical step, Vizient encourages Congress to adequately fund the programs established under the law and continue to prioritize healthcare workforce wellbeing.

Examining Staffing Agency Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nurse staffing agencies are an essential partner for hospitals and health systems; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, providers reported significant increases in the hourly cost to utilize these services. In fact, Vizient [found](#) that between October 2019 and October 2022 demand for travel nurses doubled. While the market has stabilized to some degree, Vizient still

estimates demand for travel nurses will be 20 percent higher in 2023 than prior to the pandemic. **In the last Congress, Vizient supported passage of the *Travel Nursing Agency Transparency Study Act* (S. 4352/H.R. 8576, 117th Congress) to require the Comptroller General to examine nursing travel agency practices during the pandemic and the ongoing impact of such practices on the healthcare system.** Though the legislation has not yet been reintroduced in the 118th Congress, the HELP Committee should examine the role that travel nursing agencies have played in contributing to ongoing shortages and increased expenses for healthcare providers.

Virtual Tools to Reduce Healthcare Worker Burden

Recent years have shown the utility of virtual technologies to improve healthcare delivery and reduce provider burden. One example of this is [virtual inpatient nursing](#), which allows a virtual nurse to assist a bedside nurse with a variety of issues through video and voice technology, along with electronic health record telemetry and other remote monitors. This alleviates some of the workload for bedside nurses by allowing a stationary virtual nurse to help monitor for call lights, IV sites, detect sepsis or deterioration earlier, help with documentation, and increased care coordination and collaboration. Such arrangements have led to lower burnout rates, higher engagement, and can provide an opportunity for more experienced nurses to mentor newer nurses and remain in the field for longer. **Vizient recommends Congress support programs such as virtual inpatient nursing, including remote monitoring, to help increase nurse satisfaction and retention and improve healthcare delivery.**

Telehealth and programs such as the Medicare Acute Care Hospital at Home (MACHH) program continue to be a substantial tool to improve care and healthcare access, while relieving clinician burden. In fact, a [recent study](#) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 75 percent of nurses felt telehealth reduced their work burden and made them feel more relieved. Similarly, prior to the pandemic, some of the hospitals pioneering similar models to MACHH [found](#) that readmissions were reduced from 23 percent for in-hospital patients to 7 percent in their homes, with a cost savings of 38 percent. **Vizient thanks Congress for extending the telehealth and MACHH flexibilities instituted under the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency through the end of 2024. However, longer-term certainty is needed and Vizient encourages Congress to permanently extend these programs, as well as provide funding for healthcare providers to implement additional virtual care programs.**

High Reliability Organizations

Given increasing incidences of workplace violence, staff shortages, and an increased need for healthcare providers to work overtime, it is important to create a workplace culture which empowers staff. [Vizient Safe and Reliable Healthcare](#) is an integrated solution designed to work with healthcare organizations to create high reliability organizations (HRO). HROs are designed to operate in highly complex and risk-prone environments for extended periods without causing harm or experiencing catastrophic events. This comprehensive solution leverages robust culture and employee engagement data along with our industry-leading repository of clinical and operational data to generate unique insights into the correlation between culture and outcomes. In essence, by creating a better, tailored workplace for staff, we can also produce better outcomes, including for value-based care. **Vizient recommends Congress support programs to enable hospitals and other healthcare providers to adopt models like HROs to help**

create better environments for healthcare workers and increase the quality of care for patients.

Prior Authorization

Congress can also support healthcare clinicians by reducing administrative burdens, like the over-reliance of Medicare Advantage plans on prior authorization. For instance, according to a [2021 survey by the American Medical Association](#), 88 percent of physicians reported that prior authorization interfered with continuity of care, with prior authorization having increased by 84 percent for both prescription medications and medical services in recent years. **While Vizient is grateful for the proposed rule on prior authorization (please see [Vizient's comments](#)), more is needed. Previously, Vizient supported the [Improving Seniors' Timely Access to Care Act \(S. 3018/H.R. 3173, 117th Congress\)](#), which takes needed steps to streamline the prior authorization process—we continue to encourage Congress to pass similar legislation in the future.**

Addressing Workplace Violence

A [study](#) indicates that in recent years, 44 percent of nurses reported being subject to physical violence and 68 percent reported verbal abuse. These experiences could cause physical and psychological trauma, disrupt care delivery and have a deleterious impact on care team morale. These types of incidents also consume hospital and health system resources that may impact care available for other patients. Further, Vizient has developed [recommendations](#) to aid healthcare providers address workplace violence, such as establish a threat assessment team; train employees to recognize and report warning signs to prevent incidents of workplace violence; and design a “zero incident” initiative. **Vizient recommends Congress consider legislation such as the previously introduced *Safety from Violence for Healthcare Employees (SAVE) Act* (H.R. 7961, 117th Congress), which would increase penalties for threats and physical violence towards healthcare workers and provide resources to further improve hospital security.**

Conclusion

We thank you for your continued leadership and engagement with stakeholders as you consider how to address the nation’s healthcare workforce issues.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at shoshana.krilow@vizientinc.com or 202-354-2607 if you have any questions about Vizient or if there is any way we can be of assistance as you move forward in advancing solutions to healthcare workforce challenges.

Sincerely,



Shoshana Krilow
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