



ADVANCING INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE

May 15, 2024

Rep. Marvin L. Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee
82 Smith Street, Providence, RI 02903

Re: Support of H-7902 and H-7903 to help our primary care workforce in Rhode Island

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to write in strong support of H-7902 and H-7903. As a pediatrician, professor of pediatrics at Brown University, medical director of the Care Transformation Collaborative of RI, and board member of the American Academy of Pediatrics, it's become increasingly clear through these many perspectives that we cannot fix our primary care crisis without legislative action.

After practicing primary care pediatrics and teaching medical students and residents in Rhode Island for the past 35 years, I've witnessed firsthand that primary care is crucial to an affordable, effective health care system. It improves health, contributes to longer lives, and keeps the cost of care down by preventing illness, or providing early detection and intervention with coordinated disease management. But now, primary care is at a crossroads.

We must invest in our primary care workforce immediately or very soon will have no primary care available to Rhode Islanders. Already, access to primary care doctors is extremely limited, and it's only getting worse. Finding a provider is very difficult and many of us live in fear of having our primary care doctors retire, leave to practice in another higher-paying state, or leave medicine altogether.

As a pediatrician, finding a primary care practice to transition our adolescents and young adult patients into is nearly impossible. Further, many pediatric practices are not taking new patients and many others are only taking newborns. It is very difficult to find a pediatrician for patients new to the state or moving from another practice. A survey done by RIAAP in 2018 revealed that more than 50% of the state's pediatricians planned on retiring within 10 years – and we are now close approaching that timeframe.

The reasons for this workforce crisis are complex – they are the result of longstanding policies, practices, and problematic pedagogy. Primary care has long been undervalued compared to sub-specialty or surgical care by public and private payers, paired with huge disparities across states in how primary care providers are paid. Add in the enormous cost of a medical education and its debt, many medical students – even when interested – are often unable to afford to choose a primary care career path. **This can't be fixed overnight, but the targeted legislation before you – H-7902 and H-7903 – are important steps forward.**

H-7902 pays primary care practices to educate students and residents in primary care, and H-7903 makes scholarships available to those willing to return to RI, or stay in RI and practice primary care here. Both of these bills are important, immediate steps to build a primary care workforce for our state. I urge you to support this legislation, and the future of primary care, for the sake of all Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,

Patricia Flanagan, MD, FAAP
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Professor of Pediatrics, W. Alpert Medical School Brown University