



Growing Crisis in the Clinical Laboratory Workforce

Position

To ensure access to quality health care services the healthcare system must have an adequate supply of clinical laboratory personnel. Today that supply is in already seriously short of what is needed and estimated to become critical. This shortage hampers the ability of clinical laboratories to meet the growing need for appropriate testing, hampering the ability of clinicians to diagnose and treat patients. A growing patient population and the number and complexity of medical laboratory tests are putting strains on a profession whose numbers are barely growing.

We call upon Congress to address this concern within the Veterans Health Administration and to begin to address the concern throughout our nation's health care system.

Congress must do the following:

- ✓ Enhance recruitment and retention efforts within the Veterans Health Administration by providing resources to host clinical rotations from clinical laboratory science and technology programs.
- ✓ Authorize and appropriate funding for a program to within the Public Health Service Act to ensure training for citizens seeking to enter the clinical laboratory workforce.
- ✓ Authorize the Government Accountability Organization (GAO) to study the shortage of clinical laboratory personnel and the impact on the healthcare system, and make recommendations to Congress.

Rationale

The Bureau of Labor statistics anticipates needed growth of 12,000 new medical laboratory professionals per year to meet growing demand. However, academic programs produced just 6,300 graduates in 2017; a number that has not grown in the last five years.

A 2016 survey by the American Society for Clinical Pathology of more than 1,300 laboratory managers overseeing 51,586 employees across the United States found current vacancy rates of more than seven percent in many key laboratory positions including the core laboratory, blood bank, hematology, toxicology and specimen processing. In most cases, those vacancy rates are worse than the results of a similar study conducted in 2014. Another cause for concern is the average age of the laboratory workforce, which has been increasing steadily. Results also show that 15 percent of all clinical laboratory professionals are expected to retire in the next 5 years. This is more than double the rate in 2012.

For the fourth straight year, in 2017 the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) listed Medical Technologist (clinical laboratory personnel) as one of the five largest critical need occupations

for the system. By expanding clinical sites, clinical laboratory science educational programs, which now limited the number of graduates they can produce, would expand. By exposing the VA to a wider range of professionals in training, the VA will have greater opportunity to successfully recruit them.

This crisis is the result of a decades-long decline in MLS and MLT producing academic programs. From 1970 the number of accredited programs declined from nearly 1,000 to less than 450 in 2006. Since 2008, the number of programs has rebounded modestly from 427 to 478 in 2017. That increase has not been nearly enough to address the increasing demand, and the shortage exacerbates the challenge in securing clinical sites for training.

Background

Clinical laboratory personnel are critical to our nation's health care. They provide a wide-range of diagnostic, technical, therapeutic and direct patient care and support services. These professionals are critical to physicians and nurses with whom they work and to the patients they serve. In total, clinical laboratory personnel and other allied health professions account for an estimated 60 percent of the entire health care workforce.

More than 4 billion medical laboratory tests are performed each year in the United States, the single highest volume medical activity. Approximately 70 percent of physicians' patient interactions are influenced by laboratory test data.

Owing to the sequencing of the human genome and a focus on precision medicine, new laboratory tests are being developed constantly to improve early detection and diagnosis of diseases, more accurately monitor conditions and better protect outcomes. Molecular diagnostics detect and measure the presence of genetic material or proteins associated with a specific health conditions or diseases, helping to uncover the underlying mechanisms of disease and enabling clinicians to take care at an individual level, facilitating the practice of "personalized medicine."

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