



Critical Clinical Laboratory Personnel Shortages

The ability of U.S. citizens to rely upon access to quality clinical laboratory testing is threatened by a rapidly worsening shortage of qualified clinical laboratory personnel. We urge your support of HR 1175, the "Medical Laboratory Personnel Shortage Act of 2005" as a significant step toward resolving the shortage.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 12,000 additional qualified laboratory professionals will be needed annually until 2010. The accredited clinical laboratory science (baccalaureate degree) and clinical laboratory technician (associate degree) programs in the U.S. are currently graduating 4,200 new professionals annually. The gap will obviously contribute to incrementally greater shortages every year if the trend is not reversed.

There are 171,000 laboratories in the U.S. in which Clinical Laboratory scientists/Medical Technologists, technicians and phlebotomists perform over 7 billion diagnostic tests annually. These practitioners also provide services ranging from health screening tests like hemoglobin, urinalysis, and PAP smears, to testing for infectious disease like strep throat and HIV, to cancer markers, to sophisticated DNA-based tests for genetic diseases. The objective information provided by laboratorians is used in diagnosis and treatment decisions made by physicians on virtually every patient.

Demand for testing is increasing:

- The aging population needs more health care and more tests.
- New tests are frequently introduced to improve diagnosis and care.
- The threat of bioterrorism has increased the demand for qualified laboratory professionals in infectious disease testing.

The reasons for the shortages are many:

- Many educational programs, both those based in hospitals and colleges/universities, have closed over the past 10 years due to cost saving concerns.
- Many career choices are available for those interested in science.
- Work schedules in health care (24 hours, weekends, and holidays) are less attractive.
- Perceived lack of recognition, both monetary and respect
- Job stress caused by the lack of adequate staffing, and by the imperative for work to be error-free.

There have been extremely limited funds available to clinical laboratory educational programs under Title VII in recent years. Those that are available have been quite restricted to programs focusing on rural and underserved areas. We are approaching the point at which the entire country will become an underserved area. HR 1175 would provide less restricted funds to programs, as well as some scholarship and loan forgiveness funds for students.

For patient safety, we urge your support of HR 1175 and an eventual Senate companion bill.