



March 8, 2011

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.

Dear Chairman Harkin:

The undersigned health professionals sincerely thank you for your decades of support and efforts to strengthen the public health infrastructure and health workforce of this nation. Your outstanding dedication and support was, once again, expressed through your leadership role in inserting specific public health oriented sections into the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* (PPACA) (Public Law 111-148). Your action reaffirmed the fact that one of our country's least known but most important human health resources, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Corps, is an integral component in the array of necessary resources to improve the health and well-being of our people.

As retired senior career officers who rose to the rank of Assistant Surgeon General/Rear Admiral, we have first-hand experience with past successes and the strategic future potential of the PHS Commissioned Corps as well as the operational challenges the Corps faces. Thus we are compelled to write to express our serious concerns regarding the lack of implementation of the most important Corps-related section of the PPACA – Section 5315 which authorizes the Public Health Science Track.

As you well know, the Act contained three provisions relating to the PHS Commissioned Corps: The first eliminated the numerical cap on the size of the Regular Corps and transitioned all reserve officers on active duty into the Regular Corps (Sec 5209); the second authorized a PHS Commissioned Corps Ready Reserve component (Sec 5210). Section 5315 established a Public Health Science Track (PHST) providing for 850 annual scholarships for students of certain health sciences who commit to service as PHS officers. This section is critical, not only for recruitment of much needed health professionals to the Corps; but most importantly to significantly augment the ability of the Corps to promote, protect, and advance the health and safety of the nation.

The PPACA stipulates that the business of the Public Health Science Track is to be conducted by the Surgeon General and directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to “transfer from the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund such sums as may be necessary” to establish the Track (Sec. 274). The language in the PPACA is explicit and clear yet the Department of Health and Human Services has thus far declined to transfer “such sums as may be necessary.”

The reasons for the Department’s refusal to abide by the law are unknown to us; but what we do know for certain is that the Department’s apparent reluctance to implement the Public Health

Science Track places the nation's ability to care for the public health needs of our citizens at increasing and unnecessary risk. The physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other health professionals provided for by the Track as PHS officers will ensure that our nation will have a core group of public health leaders specifically dedicated and trained to confront national unmet clinical and public health care needs so vital to our nation's public health and global security.

We are concerned that the infrastructure for public health and the protection and promotion of our nation's health and well-being are being eroded by this lack of action. We believe these matters require public and transparent discussion and urgent action. We understand the current decisions before Congress regarding the national budget are of utmost importance. We also believe it is important that the Administration abide by the direction of Congress as found in statute. Accordingly, we respectfully request an inquiry into this matter with the goal of providing the funding necessary to begin implementation of the Public Health Science Track this year.

Sincerely yours,

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