

Subcommittee on Health
Caring for America: Legislation to Support Patients, Caregivers, and Providers
Congressman Bobby L. Rush (IL-01)
October 26, 2021

Questions for Dr. Victoria Garcia Wilburn, D.H.Sc., O.T.R., F.A.O.T.A., (Assistant Professor,
Occupational Therapy, IUPUI School of Health & Human Sciences)

RUSH: I want to thank you, Madam Chair, for allowing me to participate in today's important very hearing. I am grateful that you chose to include my bill, H.R. 3320, the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act, which I introduced this Congress with Representative Markwayne Mullin, and last Congress with the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Congresswoman McMorris Rodgers. The lack of diversity in the fields of physical therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, speech and language pathology, and audiology is very troubling to me and to others.

Many of these professions have been pivotal in helping individuals recovering from COVID-19, which makes our legislation needed now more than ever. Even prior to COVID-19, this lack of diversity was extremely problematic. Research showed that this lack of diversity leads to less access to these specialists in underserved and in rural areas, and worse health outcomes are attributed to these patients.

That is why I was compelled to introduce the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3320). This bipartisan piece of legislation would authorize funding to attract, recruit, and retain students who are racial or ethnic minorities, or who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, to enter and complete programs in these professions.

And I want to thank you, Dr. Garcia Wilburn, for your appearing before the Committee today. Your story is inspiring, and I hope you and your family are very proud of what you have accomplished and will continue to accomplish.

As you know Dr. Garcia Wilburn, the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act is based on the highly effective Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs. Can you explain why that program was so successful? What best practices or lessons should the Allied Health professions take from the Title VIII programs?

GARCIA WILBURN: Thank you so much Representative Rush, I really appreciate your question and giving me the opportunity to answer your question. First, the funding provided higher education program support to focus on recruitment and retention, which we talked about numerous times today for individuals from underrepresented groups. By funding community outreach programs, higher education programs were able to show these underrepresented communities that the profession has a realistic option and pipeline to those health care professions. It showed the communities that [the] program would be partners to these individuals, with both moral and financial support as they pursue their degree, which is key.

Second, the success of the Nursing Workforce Development Act, although cliché, success breeds success. And I know we have some hurdles to currently overcome in the nursing profession, but we cannot negate the fact that the nursing profession is more diverse than ever. As programs were able to see more people from underrepresented communities graduate and go back to their communities to practice, the idea of pursuing nursing as a career became more mainstream at all degree levels, from associate to doctorate.

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These programs were used to fund grant programs to build resources within the programs, to help future classes of students, and time to see the real benefits of diversity to the profession. High school students, middle school students, beyond saw people with a similar culture, racial group, ethnicity, from their own background in a respected profession, inspiring those communities long beyond grant funding. So, this is what led to the Nursing Workforce Diversity Act, and the program has nearly doubled in diversity since then, and we're hoping to see the same success among the allied health professional programs.