



January 10, 2024

Senator Regina Birdsell, Chair
Senate Health and Human Services Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 101
33 N. State Street
Concord, NH 03301

RE: [SB 403](#) relative to health care workforce investments

Dear Chairwoman Birdsell and Members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Paula Smith and I have been the Director of the Southern NH Area Health Education Center (SNHAHEC) for twenty-six years. I am also the Contract Administrator for the Seacoast Public Health Network. I am pleased to offer my enthusiastic support for SB 403, which makes critical, timely investments in New Hampshire's primary care workforce to improve access to care for Granite Staters.

At SNHAHEC (one of three offices of our statewide network of AHEC programs), we promote recruitment and retention of the health care workforce by offering continuing education programs to health professionals, facilitating community-based rotations for health professions students, and promoting health career awareness. We are also a training hub for medical and legal interpreters who help ensure communication access in our New Hampshire health systems.

In my role at the New Hampshire AHECs, I have worked diligently to facilitate engagement with pipeline activities to increase the recruitment and retention of the health care workforce. We have a robust programmatic infrastructure that is ready to support expanded pipeline activities, and with appropriate resources we are ready to magnify our scope and scale. Currently, New Hampshire is one of the only states that does not fund its AHEC programs, and our reliance on grant funds make systematic deployment of programs across the state challenging. That is why the requested investment in SB 403 for AHEC pipeline development is an essential component of SB 403 and would be a huge step forward in addressing our state's dire workforce shortages.

Another key proposal in SB 403 that I will speak to today is the requested appropriation for Community Health Worker (CHW) voluntary certification and deployment. Training New Hampshire's CHWs is an important service our AHECs provide. We began CHW training programs in 2013, and it is my privilege to have personally worked on developing the CHW workforce since 2005. Over 300 CHWs have been trained in New Hampshire to date. These individuals play an invaluable role in patient care.

CHWs are trusted members of the community who act as the bridge between the health care system and the communities they serve. When we think about what contributes to positive health outcomes, we know that medical care is responsible for 20% of our health outcomes¹. The other 80% of what contributes to our health outcomes are called social determinants of health, or where we live, work, and play. CHWs focus on addressing social determinants by supporting

people in managing their lifestyle changes, preventing and managing chronic disease, and linking people to needed services that improve their overall health and wellness.

Research shows CHWs are both effective and cost-effectiveⁱⁱ. In New Hampshire, the CHW workforce is primarily funded by grants, since their services are currently not reimbursed. CHW certification will help set standards to allow CHWs to be eligible for reimbursement helping to sustain the workforce. CHWs are employed by hospital systems, federally qualified health centers, health departments, family resource centers, public health networks and other community-based organizations. Therefore, developing a CHW certification process will move us toward sustainability, allowing these organizations to maintain a key part of their health care team.

The Health Sector Partnerships Initiative (SPI) is a key convener of employers, academic organizations, and other stakeholders to work collectively to address workforce challenges. This group has identified important projects that have local and statewide impact. For example, most recently, SPI, with community partners, hosted a health care exploration fair for high school youth in Keene with over 300 participants. SPI created the NH Needs Caregivers Program (NHNC) in 2019 to address the shortage in the licensed nursing assistant (LNA) workforce. In the past two years, NHNC has provided support to over 400 individuals to assist them in becoming LNAs. This has a direct impact on improving patient access in nursing homes and helping hospitals to be able to discharge patients appropriately.

From my decades of experience developing and leading health workforce initiatives, I enthusiastically support the health care workforce pipeline development bill, SB 403, as a comprehensive “New Hampshire solution” to building a more sustainable workforce, particularly in rural and medically underserved areas of the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments about SB 403. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached at psmith@snhahec.org.

Sincerely,



Paula Smith, MBA, EdD
Director

ⁱ Community Health Rankings model @2104 UWPHI retrieved from countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/county-health-rankings-model

ⁱⁱ Vaughan, K., Kok, M.C., Witter, S. *et al.* Costs and cost-effectiveness of community health workers: evidence from a literature review. *Hum Resour Health* **13**, 71 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1186/60-015-0070-y>