



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 10, 2019

MEDIA CONTACTS

APTA: Emilio J. Rouco, MA, 703-706-3393 or emiliorouco@apta.org

AOTA: Katie Riley, 301-652-6611, x2963 or kriley@aota.org

ASHA: Francine Pierson, (301) 296-8715 or FPierson@asha.org

AAA: Vicki Bendure, 202-374-9259 or vicki@bendurepr.com

Legislation Introduced to Promote Workforce Diversity in Allied Health Professions

AOTA, APTA, ASHA, and AAA champion Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act to attract more people from underrepresented backgrounds to professions, maximizing care

Washington, DC (July 10, 2019) — U.S. Rep. Bobby L. Rush (D-IL) and U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) have introduced the Allied Health Workforce Diversity Act (H.R. 3637) in the House of Representatives. This legislation would provide grants to increase opportunities for individuals who are from underrepresented backgrounds, including students from racial and ethnic minorities, in the professions of occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech-language pathology, and audiology.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), and the American Academy of Audiology (AAA) are pleased to have committed champions to a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and are working together to help advance this legislation.

“African-Americans have, for too long, been underrepresented in the health sector, making up less than 5% of physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and audiologists. That is unacceptable, as it is not how America looks. The U.S. Institute of Medicine has found evidence that patients have better health outcomes when the doctor and patient are the same race or ethnicity,” Rep. Rush said. “I am pleased to work on this legislation to help minority and underrepresented communities provide pathways to meaningful, high-paying jobs in the health sector and to help expand health professional coverage to communities that need it. By working together, we can make real change for Americans across the country and affirm our commitment to allow everyone the opportunity to achieve the American dream.”

- more -

Rep. Rodgers agreed. "I've seen firsthand the benefits of occupational therapy, speech pathology, audiology, and physical therapy in helping people to live more full and independent lives. That's why I'm joining in introducing this bipartisan legislation to encourage a more diverse workforce in these fields," she said. "When people from underserved areas go into these fields, they are more likely to serve our rural communities. This bill will help better serve Eastern Washington and the people who rely on these allied health professionals."

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants help people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations). According to AOTA's 2015 Salary & Workforce Survey, the percentage of occupational therapy practitioners identifying themselves as African American or black is 3.1%, and those identifying as Hispanic or Latino is 3.2%. Only 1.4% identify as multiethnic.

"The ability for an occupational therapy client to identify culturally with their occupational therapy practitioner enhances the therapist-client experience," said Wendy C. Hildenbrand, PhD, MPH, OTR/L, FAOTA, president of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). "This legislation would provide new professional opportunities for individuals whose backgrounds are currently underrepresented in the occupational therapy workforce. Having a more diverse workforce builds capacity for occupational therapy professionals to better address the health needs of all Americans."

Of the approximately 336,500 physical therapists and physical therapist assistants currently in the U.S., only 18.3%, are considered racial or ethnic minorities, which does not reflect the patients and clients served. APTA is committed to increasing diversity among the physical therapy workforce, which is why it is a central goal of the association's new strategic plan.

"APTA's strategic plan calls for us to be an inclusive organization that reflects the diversity of the society the physical therapy profession serves. To do so, we must build a diverse profession by ensuring there are opportunities that allow for inclusion of all individuals who want to become physical therapists and physical therapist assistants. This legislation will help to provide those," said APTA President Sharon Dunn, PT, PhD. "The population we serve is evolving and becoming ever more diverse. We know that patients who receive care from providers who share their racial and ethnic backgrounds tend to respond better to treatment. That's one reason this legislation is so important, and we applaud the representatives who have introduced it."

Just over 8% of ASHA members identify themselves as members of an underrepresented racial group, along with 5.3% who identify their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, only 6% of ASHA's audiologists, speech-language pathologists, and support personnel indicate that they meet the ASHA definition of a bilingual service provider.

“Recruiting and sustaining a diverse workforce of audiologists and speech-language pathologists—to best serve the needs of an increasingly diverse population of clients, patients, and students—has long been a priority for ASHA,” said ASHA President Shari Robertson, PhD, CCC-SLP. “Additionally, we know that a more diverse workforce allows us to leverage a broad range of experience, knowledge, and skill for more creative and innovative problem-solving to address the complex issues prevalent in today’s education and health care systems. As our organization celebrates a milestone—the 50th anniversary of ASHA’s Office of Multicultural Affairs—this year, it is especially gratifying to see this legislation introduced. We thank Representatives Rush and Rodgers for their leadership on this important issue.”

Representatives from the American Academy of Audiology (AAA) called the measure a win-win.

“Being able to ensure that we’ve made the profession of audiology accessible and inclusive for everyone will strengthen the profession and, hopefully, provide access to hearing health services to a larger population,” said Lisa Christensen, AuD, president of AAA. “The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 38 million people in the U.S. have some form of hearing loss and need to see an audiologist. This bill will help to provide greater opportunities for more people to enter our profession. It’s a win for everyone.”

The American Physical Therapy Association represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. Visit MoveForwardPT.com to learn more about the types of conditions physical therapists treat, and find a physical therapist in your area. To learn more, visit www.apta.org.

Founded in 1917, AOTA represents the professional interests and concerns of more than 213,000 occupational therapists, assistants, and students nationwide. The Association educates the public and advances the profession of occupational therapy by providing resources, setting standards including accreditations, and serving as an advocate to improve health care. Based in Bethesda, Md., AOTA’s major programs and activities are directed toward promoting the professional development of its members and assuring consumer access to quality services so patients can maximize their individual potential. For more information, visit www.aota.org.

ASHA is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 204,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Audiologists specialize in preventing and assessing hearing and balance disorders as well as providing audiologic treatment, including hearing aids. Speech-language pathologists identify, assess, and treat speech and language problems, including swallowing disorders. Visit www.asha.org.

The American Academy of Audiology is the world’s largest professional organization of, by, and for audiologists. Representing the interests of approximately 14,000 audiologists nationwide, the Academy is dedicated to providing quality hearing care services through professional development, education, research, and increased public awareness of hearing and balance disorders. For more information or to find an audiologist, go to www.audiology.org.

To speak with a representative from APTA, contact Director of Public and Media Relations Emilio J. Rouco at 703-706-3393 or emiliorouco@apta.org. To speak with a representative from AOTA, contact Manager of Media & Public Relations Katie Riley at 301-652-6611 x2963 or kriley@aota.org. To speak with a representative from ASHA, contact Public Relations Manager Francine Pierson at 301-296-8715 or FPierson@asha.org. To speak with a representative from AAA, contact Vicki Bendure, 202-374-9259 or vicki@bendurepr.com.

###