

Caring for an Aging America Act of 2008 (S. 2708)

Introduced by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA)
and cosponsored by Senator Susan Collins (R-ME)

The United States is facing an immediate and growing crisis in providing care for our aging population, which is projected to almost double from 37 million today to nearly 72 million by 2030. Health care providers with the necessary training to give older Americans the best possible care are in critically short supply. There is an urgent need to prepare the health care workforce, including physicians, nurses, social workers and psychologists, to better serve the increasing numbers of older adults. There is also a need to provide more incentives to attract and retain top practitioners into the fields of geriatric care and gerontology, which remain among the least well-compensated specialties.

Purpose of the Bill

To attract and retain trained health care professionals and direct care workers dedicated to providing quality care to the growing population of older Americans by providing loan forgiveness and career advancement opportunities. The bill will also establish a health and long-term care workforce advisory panel for an aging America.

Background

The U.S. is rapidly aging, and the need for long-term care is growing. The first wave of baby boomers turns 65 in 2010.

- Those aged 85 and older are the fastest growing segment of the older population and are the most in need of long-term care services. This age group is projected to double from 4.7 million in 2003 to 9.6 million in 2030, and to double again to 20.9 million in 2050.
- Most (82%) older adults have at least one chronic condition and about two-thirds (65%) have multiple chronic conditions, which complicates treatment and requires coordinated care.

Most health providers in the U.S. receive almost no formal training in the fields of geriatrics or gerontology, which undermines quality of care for America's seniors.

- 7,128 U.S. physicians are certified geriatricians today; 36,000 geriatricians are needed by 2030.
- Less than 3% of U.S. medical students opt to take an elective in geriatrics.
- Only 5% of social workers are trained in aging issues and only 3% of advance practice nurses specialize in aging.
- Recruitment and retention of direct care workers in home-based care, assisted living and nursing homes also is a looming crisis due to low wages and few benefits, lack of work status, lack of career advancement, potential for injury and inadequate training.

Overview of the Legislation

The bill directly addresses the emerging care gap between the dramatically increasing numbers of older Americans and the serious lack of providers who are trained in caring for the medical, health and social support needs of the aging population.

The bill utilizes and builds on established mechanisms under the Public Health Service Act and administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The Caring for an Aging America Act of 2008 will:

Build a cadre of health professionals trained in the care of older adults by linking educational loan repayment to a service commitment to the aging population

- Establishes the Geriatric and Gerontology Loan Repayment Program for *physicians, physician assistants, advance practice nurses, psychologists and social workers* who complete specialty training in geriatrics or gerontology and who agree to provide full-time clinical practice and service to older adults for a minimum of two years.
 - The program will utilize the loan repayment mechanism under the National Health Service Corps (NHSC). It will award payments of up to \$35,000 a year during the first two years of practice. Participants may be eligible to work a third or fourth year and receive loan payments of up to an additional \$40,000 per year.
- Expands eligibility for the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program (NELRP) to include *registered nurses* who complete specialty training in geriatrics or gerontology and who choose to provide nursing services to older adults in home and community-based or facility-based long-term care settings.
 - The NELRP repays 60% over two years of the loan balance of nurses in exchange for two years of service. Participants may be eligible to work a third year and receive an additional 25% of loan repayment.

Expand career advancement opportunities for direct care workers in long-term care settings

- Strengthens the existing Career Ladder Grants Program to focus on specialty training in long-term care services for nursing personnel and direct care workers (such as home health aides, certified nursing assistants) who provide services in home and community-based or facility-based long-term care settings.

Create a Health and Long-Term Care Workforce Advisory Panel for an Aging America

- Authorizes the Secretary of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Secretary of Labor, to establish a Health and Long-Term Care Workforce Advisory Panel to examine and advise each Secretary and Congress on workforce issues related to health and long-term care for the aging population.
- The Advisory Panel will analyze the existing geriatric health and long-term care workforce data infrastructure; make recommendations for new or additional data to track supply, demand, and workforce shortages related to care needs for the aging; and conduct a study to identify incentives for recruitment and retention of new populations of clinicians and providers to serve vulnerable older adults.

Implementing the Caring for an Aging America Act of 2008 will cost \$11 million in fiscal year 2009 and \$130 million over the 2009-2013 period.