

November 19, 2021

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
U.S. Senate
709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
U.S. House of Representatives
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Baldwin and Senator Collins:

On behalf of the American Society for Microbiology (ASM), we write to express our support for the Bolstering Infectious Outbreaks (BIO) Preparedness Workforce Act of 2021. Many of ASM's 30,000 members work in clinical microbiology laboratories in a range of urban and rural settings; including, but not limited to, academic and university-based medical centers, large healthcare systems, private community hospitals, independent laboratories, and public health laboratories. This bill is an important step forward in addressing the clinical microbiology laboratory professional shortages that our field has experienced for several years now, coupled with the lack of federally-funded programs to address financial barriers to entering the field.

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused a spotlight on the need for a strong clinical laboratory workforce. These highly trained professionals have served on the front lines of the COVID-19 response, and the clinical microbiologist's role of developing, validating and deploying timely, accurate and reliable diagnostics has taken on even greater significance. Diagnostics enable and inform all aspects of infectious disease outbreak management—from surveillance and detection, to response, containment and recovery.

The pandemic only exacerbated an existing shortage in clinical laboratory scientists and infectious disease laboratory professionals. Results of a survey published in the *American Journal of Clinical Pathology* in 2019 showed a total vacancy rate of 10.14%, with a staff vacancy rate of 10.56% and a supervisor vacancy rate of nearly 7%. Results also revealed that 17.38% of clinical microbiology department employees are expected to retire in the next five years.¹

In addition to personnel challenges, laboratories continue to be stretched thin with supply shortages and increased demand from all angles (COVID-19 diagnostic and surveillance testing and routine clinical testing)). Personnel and supply constraints are negatively affecting testing for infectious agents like strep, RSV, hepatitis C, TB, screening for antimicrobial resistance, and soon- possibly flu. Many labs cannot pivot easily due to lack of resources and diversity of testing platforms, and this is especially true in underserved areas. We are pleased that the legislation's provisions aim to assist clinical laboratory professionals working in medically underserved areas

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/ajcp/article/152/2/155/5499263?login=true>

and aim to boost the number of professionals working in biopreparedness from populations already underrepresented in healthcare.

We thank you for your leadership in sponsoring this legislation and recognizing the need to support a strong pipeline of clinical microbiologists, clinical laboratory scientists and other health care professionals. Supporting professionals working in biopreparedness will ensure a strong workforce to address the next pandemic or other health emergency our nation may face. If you have any questions, please contact Mary Lee Watts, ASM Director of Federal Affairs at mwatts@asmusa.org or 571-228-8345.

Sincerely,



Melissa B. Miller, PhD
Chair, ASM Clinical and Public Health
Microbiology Committee



Stacey L. Schultz-Cherry, PhD
Chair, ASM Public and Scientific
Affairs Committee

Cc: The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Jacky Rosen