Congressional Bill Would Add 1,000 Doctors To Fight Opioid Addiction

Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) testifies to the Senate Judiciary Committee about the damage done by assault rifles during a hearing about the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill March 14, 2018 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

A bipartisan health bill in Congress is using the opioid crisis as a way to pay for doctor training and medical residency slots, an area of federal funding that hasn’t expanded in two decades.


“This thoughtful bill would provide Medicare support for an additional 1,000 graduate medical education positions over the next five years in hospitals that have, or are in the process of establishing, accredited residency programs in addiction medicine, addiction psychiatry, or pain management,” said Dr. Darrell Kirch, president and CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) in a statement.

The AAMC for years has been working with members of Congress to find ways to increase federal support for medical education and residency slots in particular.
Medicare health insurance for the elderly is the primary source for graduate medical education (GME) in the U.S.

There's a more comprehensive bill to increase the nation’s supply of physicians known as the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act, but it has been slow to gain momentum in Washington. It would lift the funding cap placed on the number of residents and fellows funded by Medicare since the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 and expand the number of federally supported residency positions by adding an additional 3,000 positions each year for the next five years.

But the latest legislative push to increase federally-supported residency slots is more "targeted," supporters say. Nelson's office said the Opioid Workforce Act “would allow eligible hospitals to add up to 25 full-time residency positions in their opioid-related medical residency programs.”

“The addition of these targeted slots would increase the ability of these institutions to train more physicians who are specialized to treat patients with substance use disorders and chronic pain,” Kirch said. “This important legislation would strengthen the health care workforce serving on the front lines of the nation’s opioid epidemic, and we urge Congress to include it in any final package to combat the opioid crisis.”

Meanwhile, the AAMC is still hopeful the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2017 wins federal support, citing its own analysis showing a shortage of up to 120,000 physicians “across a number of disciplines by 2030.”

For more information on healthcare, read Bruce Japsen's book, Inside Obamacare: From Barack And Michelle To The Affordable Care Act.