



## HR 525: Veterinary Public Health Amendments Act

### BACKGROUND

The interaction between humans and animals is an important part of the daily lives of people in the US and around the world with respect to food and fiber, work, companionship, public and environmental health, health promotion, and biomedical research. In 1999 The World Health Organization (WHO) defined veterinary public health as: “the sum of all contributions to the physical, mental, and social well-being of humans through the understanding and application of veterinary science.” Thus veterinarians are an important part of the US and global public health workforce by improving the health and wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment. Public health veterinarians, serving in a number of roles, protect human health by preventing and controlling infectious diseases, ensuring the safety and security of the nation’s food supply, promoting healthy environments, and providing health care for animals.

In fact for more than 100 years veterinarians have been responsible for some of the most significant advances in public health including the near eradication of diseases such as tuberculosis and brucellosis in domestic animals. In recent years, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Monkeypox, West Nile Virus, Lyme disease, highly pathogenic Avian Influenza (H5N1), and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (Mad Cow Disease) have also had a significant impact on public health, and veterinarians have played a vital role in the identification, diagnosis, control, and surveillance of all of these diseases.

More and more public health threats have been making headlines for the past several years, from the H1N1 virus and avian influenza to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and West Nile Virus. Even the recent egg recall due to salmonella enteritidis is an example where improved veterinary resources can better identify and protect the public. As these stories make their way onto the front page, the evening news, and the Internet, constituents become concerned, and rightly so, about their families’ health and safety and that of their communities.

## THE PROBLEM

There are critical shortages of veterinarians working in public health practice disciplines such as bioterrorism and emergency preparedness, environmental health, food safety and security, food production systems, regulatory medicine, diagnostic laboratory medicine and biomedical research and in our local, state, and federal workforces.

Veterinarians interested in pursuing a career in public health face additional financial burdens due to additional education requirements. 89% of today's veterinary students have debt upon graduation of which 90.4% was incurred while in vet school. The mean educational debt is around \$130,000 and a third of the students had an average debt above \$150,000.

An alarming report from the GAO warns that "there is a growing shortage of veterinarians nationwide, particularly of veterinarians who care for animals raised for food, serve in rural communities, and have training in public health." The leading cause of the shortage is lack of capacity at U.S. veterinary medical colleges, where applicants outnumber seats by two to one, to graduate a sufficient number of veterinarians to meet societal demands.

## THE SOLUTION

The goal of H.R. 525 is to help increase the number of veterinary public health professionals in the workforce. H.R. 525 clarifies that "veterinary public health" professionals are intended to be included among the health professionals for purposes of two PHSA sections.

The first provision, PHSA section 765, currently provides authority for the Secretary of HHS to award grants and contracts to eligible entities to increase the number of individuals in the public health workforce, to enhance the quality of the health workforce, and to enhance the ability of the health workforce to meet national, state, and local needs. The second provision, PHSA section 776, provides for a loan repayment program for public health professionals. H.R. 525 clarifies that veterinary public health professionals are considered public health professionals for the purposes of both PHSA section 765 and PHSA section 776.

H.R. 525 also defines "veterinary public health" to include veterinarians engaged in one or more of the following areas to the extent such areas have an impact on human health: biodefense and emergency preparedness, emerging and reemerging infectious diseases, environmental health, ecosystem health, pre-harvest and post-harvest food protection, regulatory medicine, diagnostic laboratory medicine, veterinary pathology, biomedical research, practice of food animal medicine in rural areas, and government practice.



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### IMPORTANT FACTS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Approximately 48 million Americans get sick from foodborne disease resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3000 deaths each year.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the United States will need an additional 20,000 veterinarians by 2018.
- Twenty-two of the 28 U.S. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine offer dual DVM/MPH degrees.
- Six of the seven Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Critical Biological Agents “Category A” diseases are diseases common to both animals and humans.
- Veterinarians working in private practice, state and federal government, wildlife programs, zoos, research, the military and private industry and organizations are involved in public health activities on a daily basis.
- 27% of the veterinarians at APHIS, FSIS, ARS, The Army, and FDA will be eligible to retire within 3 years.
- A 2004 National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report found that of American Veterinary Medical Association members, <1 percent were board certified in laboratory animal medicine and <2 percent were board certified in pathology.
- In 2001, only 4.7 percent of all NIH grants funded for animal research were awarded to veterinarian principal investigators.
- 50 percent of U.S. Public Health Service veterinary medical officers are now eligible for retirement.
- 43 percent of veterinary pathology positions are unfilled, and many pathologists are near retirement.
- Approximately 61 percent of over 1400 infectious disease organisms that cause illness in humans are caused by organisms transmissible from animals to people.
- USDA reports that “the current cadre of veterinarians and animal health professionals is clearly insufficient to handle the increased workload associated with trade obligations, emergencies, and already apparent future demands

## **IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC HEALTH**

### **PROTECTING AND PROMOTING PUBLIC HEALTH**

- Ensuring an adequate and safe food supply
- Environmental health — agricultural food animal production, ensuring clean air and water
- Providing leadership in communities on public health, emergency response
- Detection, prevention, control, and eradication of infectious diseases transmitted from animals to humans (rabies, psittacosis, parasitic diseases, plague, anthrax, tuberculosis, etc).
- Promoting mental health through keeping our household companion animals (considered family members by many) healthy
- Preventing chronic diseases through improved nutrition, physical activity, lower blood pressures from contact with pets
- Health education — the health issues of pets (e.g., obesity, diabetes, nutrition) often mirror those experienced by their owners. Veterinarians also provide important information to the public (their clients) on risks associated with zoonoses, food safety, pandemic influenza, and more
- Injury prevention — through counseling, prevent dog bite injuries and falls related to pets, and identify and prevent household environments where family and pet abuse may occur
- Assisting the disabled — keeping guide and other working dogs, and other species trained to assist the disabled, healthy

### **PROTECTION OF OUR NATIONAL SECURITY**

- Food and water supply and safety
- Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response — 80 percent of agents of biothreat concern are zoonoses
- Working and guard dogs, pack mules in the military services
- Emergency preparedness and response
- Economic security via healthy and robust international trade of animal products

### **ADVANCING BIOMEDICAL AND AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH**

- Animal models, pathology, epidemiology, diagnostics, vaccines, as principal investigators and laboratory animal veterinarians