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TESTIMONY RE: PROPOSED S.B. NO. 246 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A LOAN  
FORGIVENESS PROGRAM FOR HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED  
STUDENTS PURSUING CAREERS IN NURSING

Public Health Committee Hearing  
February 29, 2008

Senator Handley, Representative Sayers and members of the Public Health Committee. Thank-you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Nurses' Association (CNA), the professional organization for registered nurses in Connecticut. I am Dr. Mary Jane Williams, past-president of the Connecticut Nurses' Association, current chairperson of its Government Relations Committee and professor and chair of nursing at the University of Hartford. I have practiced nursing for over 40 years and have been educating nurses in Connecticut for 35 years. I am providing testimony in support of S.B. No. 246 An Act Establishing a Loan Forgiveness Program for Historically Underrepresented Students Pursuing Careers in Nursing.

It is essential that this legislation be supported. It is becoming more difficult for the Historically Underrepresented Student to pursue higher education in Connecticut in the Public and/or Independent sector of the health care professional schools due to the spiraling cost of higher education. To eliminate this large group of individuals from the health care work force because of the cost of education severely undermines the ability of the health care workforce to increase its diversity which will meet the goal of more adequately reflecting society and better able to meet the needs of the patients we all care for across all health care settings.

The data is clear.

- When the health care provider's race, ethnicity and language are congruent with their patient's, the outcome of care is better and both the provider and the patient are more satisfied.
- Although there have been efforts to close the gaps in diversity of our health care workforce, the "changing demographics and economics of our growing multicultural world and the long-standing disparities in the health status of people from culturally diverse backgrounds have challenged health care providers and organizations to consider cultural diversity as a priority." (Online Journal of Issues in Nursing (OJIN) published 1/31/03).

While we support the need for a more diverse workforce to better meet the needs of Connecticut's population, it is essential that we look at this from a global perspective and over the long term. We need to diversify our efforts in a number of areas.

- Our pipeline of future health care providers from diverse backgrounds must begin at the pre-K level in order to have students move successfully from kindergarten through high school.
- We must then ensure that students from historically underrepresented groups are competent to enter higher education programs. This means not only intellectually but also able to be financially able to do this.
- We next need to ensure that students who have entered health care educational programs are provided the support to complete those programs.
- These efforts must be coordinated and supported by a statewide infrastructure to maintain the process over time.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations. We are available for information and consultation about this important issue.