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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-5401

November 4, 2009

The Honorable Thomas Rivera Schatz
President
Senate of Puerto Rico
P.O. Box 9023431
San Juan PR 00902-3431

The Honorable Jennifer González Colón
President
Puerto Rico House of Representatives
P.O. Box 9022228
San Juan, PR 00902-2228

Dear President Rivera Schatz and President González Colón:

The health reform debate currently taking place in Washington has caused me to take a closer look at the strengths and weaknesses of Puerto Rico's health care system. My goal is to identify ways to improve patient care on the Island in a cost-efficient manner. In line with this objective, I write to respectfully request that you seek the passage of legislation this session to enable (1) Nurse Practitioners and (2) Physician Assistants to be licensed and to provide certain services in Puerto Rico. Based on evidence gleaned from other U.S. jurisdictions, I believe the benefits to public health—and to the public treasury—resulting from such measures will be considerable. While I am aware that these proposals may generate opposition in certain quarters, I believe all reasonable concerns can be addressed by drafting the legislation in a prudent and balanced manner.

Nurse Practitioners—commonly referred to as NPs—are registered nurses who have received education and clinical training beyond their registered nurse preparation. According to the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, there are more than 125,000 NPs practicing in the United States. Most NPs have master's degrees and many have doctorates. They can diagnose and treat a wide range of health problems, filling in gaps where physicians are either overburdened or underrepresented, thereby improving patient care and reducing health care costs. It is critical to note that NPs are licensed to practice in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, pursuant to the specific rules and regulations established by each jurisdiction. There is no reason—medical or other—why Puerto Rico should continue to be the lone exception to this rule. While we can certainly engage in a spirited debate regarding the precise scope of services that NPs should be authorized by local legislation to provide to patients in Puerto Rico, it cannot be reasonably argued that NPs should not be licensed to practice at all on the Island.

The same holds true for Physician Assistants. Physician Assistants—known as PAs—are medical professionals who practice under the supervision of a licensed physician. As in the case of Nurse Practitioners, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands,

Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands have licensed PAs to practice. Depending on the jurisdiction, PAs are authorized to perform a variety of critical services, including obtaining medical histories, performing examinations, prescribing medication and recommending other treatments, interpreting diagnostic tests, referring patients to specialists, and assisting during surgery. According to a survey conducted in 2008 by the American Academy of Physician Assistants, over 50% of the nation's nearly 75,000 PAs are employed in physicians' offices or clinics, nearly 25% are employed by hospitals, and the remainder are employed by public health clinics, nursing homes, schools, and prisons. PAs play a particularly vital role in underserved, low-income communities in rural and urban areas.

For all the foregoing reasons, I respectfully ask that you offer or otherwise support legislation to enable NPs and PAs to be licensed and to practice in Puerto Rico. I would note that Representative Carlos (Johnny) Méndez Nuñez has introduced a bill to license and regulate the PA profession in Puerto Rico. My staff and I are at your disposal should you require additional information. I very much look forward to working with you on this matter.

Sincerely,



Pedro R. Pierluisi
Member of Congress