

December 9, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-222, US Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, US Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, US Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, US Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer:

On behalf of the American Optometric Association (AOA) and the American Optometric Student Association (AOSA), we thank you for your hard work to reduce the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As you prepare additional legislation addressing the public health emergency and economic crisis, we respectfully urge you to support optometry graduate students and the future patients and communities they will serve.

The AOA represents more than 44,000 doctors of optometry (O.D.), optometric professionals, and optometry students. Doctors of optometry serve as frontline primary care doctors with respect to eye and vision care and optometry practices nationwide are delivering essential care to patients during the public health emergency. However, without addressing the continued financial and workforce concerns of student borrowers, many student doctors of optometry may not be able to play a future frontline role in caring for the needs of neighbors and helping communities recover. In 2018, 81 percent of U.S. optometry graduates accumulated debt with a mean debt of \$178,922. The student loan burden continues to increase, and in this uncertain economic environment, the debt-to-income ratio is growing higher.

During this time of crisis, it has been made especially clear that a strong and well-trained health care workforce is critical for our country's success. We appreciate that the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act suspended payments and interest on federally held student loans and that the U.S. Department of Education recently extended the federal student loan administrative forbearance period, the pause in interest accrual, and the suspension of collections activity through January 31, 2021; however, we urge Congress to provide further relief for student loan borrowers.

As you consider the next COVID relief package, we respectfully ask that you include a further extension of the timeline on suspension of loan payments, as well as additional student debt relief and loan forgiveness provisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted optometry students by resulting in the recent postponement of certain boards examinations which can delay entry into their roles as providers.

Student loan relief is critical for optometry graduate students who are disproportionately bearing the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic through a disrupted education, uncertain job market, and delays in their ability to practice.

We look forward to continuing working with you to support optometry graduate students and the future health care workforce. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Sally Guthrie, AOA Associate Director of Congressional Relations, at SGuthrie@aoa.org.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of William T. Reynolds in black ink, with a small triangle symbol at the end.

William T. Reynolds, O.D.
President, American Optometric Association
(AOA)

Handwritten signature of Alexander Bennett in black ink, featuring a stylized 'A' and 'B' with an arrow pointing to the right.

Alexander Bennett
President, American Optometric Student
Association (AOSA)