

Investing in HIM's Future: the Time is Now to Address HIM Work Force Issues

Save to myBoK

by Dan Rode, FHFMA

This spring AHIMA had its largest Hill Day ever: 79 members from 31 states made more than 130 visits to legislators in just a few short hours.

As members prepared for these visits, they asked AHIMA's Washington office staff, "What if I only have 10 minutes to make my pitch? What issue do I raise with my member of Congress?"

Our answer? Talk about our HIM work force needs. This issue continues to be a top priority for the profession.

Federal Investment in Allied Health

Many people have probably heard about the nursing shortage in the United States. Perhaps they have also heard predictions about a pending shortage of physicians. But have they heard about the shortages of allied health professionals or HIM professionals? Probably not. If they have, it was most likely the result of a local shortage or a concern about healthcare organizations outsourcing work overseas. The average individual knows what physicians and nurses do, but most cannot define a health information professional outside of information technology.

Allied health professionals make up approximately 60 percent of the US healthcare work force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Yet HIM professionals and others in the allied health professions still remain the silent majority. While the bureau and others predict future work force shortages in these professions, the majority of the public really doesn't appreciate the problem, failing to identify those in allied health professions and the role they play in health services.

The Allied Health Reinvestment Act

For many years HIM programs received federal support from Title VII of the Public Health Law. The amount of financial support provided through Title VII and the amount actually going to allied programs has diminished greatly, and in 2005 only slightly more than \$5 million has been allocated to allied health. The Bush administration's 2006 budget fails to allot any money for allied health at this point. When faced with a similar dilemma several years ago, the nursing profession began a campaign for reinvestment legislation that has led to significant funds for education and recruitment. Now is the time for an HIM campaign.

In 2004 AHIMA joined other allied health professions and educators to seek reinvestment in our respective professions. The Allied Health Reinvestment Act was first introduced in 2004 by representatives Cliff Stearns (R-FL) and Ted Strickland (D-OH), joined in the Senate by Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT). This year representatives Stearns and Strickland introduced our legislation again (HR 215), as did Senator Cantwell (S 473).

The legislation calls for Title VII monies to be specifically set aside for:

- Student and faculty recruitment
- Scholarships for students, faculty, and professionals seeking additional education to stay abreast of the field
- Funds for the development of existing programs and the establishment of new programs where needed

Federal legislation is a two-step process. First the bill has to be passed by Congress. This includes recruiting bill sponsors and support for the legislation to be heard in committees and approved by both houses of Congress. The Allied Health Reinvestment Act is currently at this stage, which is why it was the perfect subject of our Congressional visits on Hill Day.

Once the legislation becomes a law, the next step is to ensure that money is appropriated to support it. At this point attention and advocacy is turned to the appropriations committees that handle education, health, and labor appropriations. In this time of budget deficits and multiple spending priorities, the case for allied health spending has to be made as well.

Voice Your Support

The 79 AHIMA members who took part in Hill Day represent our first-strike effort for federal support of allied health and HIM education. We need you for our next strike. AHIMA has initiated a letter-writing campaign to Congress via the Advocacy Assistant tool (www.ahima.org/dc/aa). By visiting this site and selecting “My Advocacy Action Center” and “Action Alert!” you can send a letter to your members of Congress urging them to cosponsor the reinvestment legislation in their house of Congress. If your congressperson has already signed on (the Action Center keeps track), you can also send them a thank-you letter. The whole process takes fewer than 10 minutes.

This is not the last time we will call on you. As noted, the federal appropriations process (should an act be approved) will require your attention and support. Even as we push for the passage of the Allied Health Reinvestment Act, AHIMA is also working to obtain funding under the existing Title VII as it currently stands. AHIMA will update you on this effort via AHIMA’s E-alert.

Your assistance is also needed at the local level. Formal work force efforts are under way with state and federal agencies. Write your state legislators in support of allied health work force initiatives, as state funding supports academic allied health programs. HIM educators in your state or at your alma mater can also use your support for their programs and to recruit students.

Your component state association can also join with other healthcare associations to make sure that the work force in your area is maintained at the numbers needed and the education levels necessary. Your assistance via your state association can make things happen, and as demand grows in the state more leverage can be exerted at a federal level.

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