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Statement

of

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**U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
February 12, 2008**

“Addressing Healthcare Workforce Issues for the Future”

Chairman Sanders and distinguished members of the Committee, the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP) thanks the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions for this opportunity to comment for the record on healthcare workforce shortages and reauthorization of Title VII Health Professions Programs under the Public Health Service Act.

For many years, our nation’s clinical laboratories have faced a critical and growing shortage of qualified laboratory technologists and technicians, with the shortfall evident in almost every state in our country. This shortage hampers the ability of clinical laboratories to meet patient testing demands, which compromises patient health and welfare. At the same time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by 2016, the United States will need 92,000 additional medical technologists and technicians to replace retiring staff and fill newly created positions. With fewer than 4,700 individuals graduating each year from accredited training programs, including only 260 cytotechnologists (the individuals who examine gynecologic (Pap smears) and non-gynecologic specimens), the number of graduates would need to increase more than three-fold to meet the estimated demand.

To make matters worse, our nation’s capacity to train new laboratory personnel has declined substantially over the past ten years. According to the National Accrediting Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences, the number of accredited medical technology programs dropped from 709 in 1975 to 222 in 2007. For cytotechnologists, the number of training programs has been reduced 40 percent; from 65 programs in 1994 to 39 active programs in 2008.

Recently, however, industry-sponsored campaigns promoting new technologies, such as the HPV vaccine and HPV DNA test, have questioned the future clinical relevance of the Pap smear. This campaign has inadvertently exacerbated the laboratory workforce

shortage, specifically for cytotechnologists, with many prominent cytotechnologist training programs closing or slated to close this year. These programs have closed under the mistaken belief that cytotechnologists only perform gynecologic cytology (Pap smears). Unfortunately, HPV vaccines do not protect the currently infected population that needs to be screened for cervical cancer (over 50 million women) nor do they protect the young girls that receive the vaccine from the entire spectrum of viruses that cause cervical cancer--thus the Pap Test will continue to be a preventative health care imperative for many decades to come. Moreover, the belief that cytotechnologists perform only Pap smears belies their true role in patient care. Cytotechnologists are also vitally important in interpreting all body sites—from lung to breast cancer, from lymphoma to fine needle aspiration biopsies. The damage caused by these program closures can not be easily reversed and the potential consequences for patient care will be profound.

Every two years, the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP) conducts its nationwide Wage and Vacancy Survey which provides a thorough benchmarking of key employment statistics in America's clinical laboratories. In the 2005 survey, nearly 44 percent of responding laboratories across the country reported difficulty filling laboratory personnel positions. Rural areas and areas served by smaller hospitals, in particular, are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified laboratory personnel. In addition, half of all laboratories are reporting problems hiring laboratory personnel. Medical laboratories reported even greater difficulty finding personnel for evening and night shifts at 72 and 82 percent, respectively, and on average, it was taking more than two months to fill medical technologist, histotechnologist, and cytotechnologist openings. The current vacancy rate for histotechnologists is exceptionally high at 30%. Furthermore, the impending retirement of thousands of baby boomers threatens to transform a serious personnel shortage into nothing less than a national healthcare crisis.

The reduction in the number of training programs is particularly severe in rural areas, where many potential laboratory practitioners seek training programs near their homes. At the same time, many urban areas have also been affected. The cities of Los Angeles and Miami do not have any medical technologist or medical laboratory technician training programs. Moreover, there are no cytotechnologist training programs in Florida. Now, students who *are* interested in pursuing a career as a laboratory professional face limited opportunities to do so.

To address this problem, funding mechanisms are needed to encourage students to consider careers in clinical laboratories and encourage the development and enhancement of laboratory training programs. These programs can come in the form of public service announcements, scholarships/fellowships, low interest loans, loan forgiveness programs, and grants to academic institutions and professional associations. These types of programs will support the education, training and continuing education of laboratory professionals and is needed to address this growing problem and thwart a national crisis.

The American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP) urges Members of Congress to restore funding for the Title VII Allied Health Programs to their FY 2005 levels of \$300 million. We urge consideration of the establishment of an independent title (outside Title VII) under the Public Health Services Act dedicated to the clinical laboratory field. We

also urge Senators to cosponsor the Allied Health Reinvestment Act (Cantwell), S. 605. Discussions are underway on a House companion bill. The Allied Health Reinvestment Act (AHRA) provides incentives for individuals to pursue allied health careers. The legislation does this via programs to support students interested in allied health careers and the academic institutions that train them. The legislation also assists with faculty development and provides for public service announcements to increase interest in allied health careers.

AHRA builds on the important contributions of the Title VII allied health professions programs, such as the allied health and other disciplines program. The allied health and other disciplines program has provided grants for several institutions to develop innovative programs, including those serving clinical laboratory professionals, that serve not just patients in states where these programs are located but also patients in other states as well. The University of Nebraska, for example, was a recipient of several of these grants. According to data from the Health Research and Services Administration, Nebraska has more than 128 laboratory professionals per 100,000 residents—almost twice the number of Wyoming and one of the highest concentrations of laboratory personnel per capita in the United States. Unfortunately, due to cuts in funding for the allied health and other disciplines grants program, funding for the University of Nebraska program and other programs supporting clinical laboratory science have been eliminated.

America's medical laboratory professionals play a critical role in health care. The vast majority of all medical diagnoses are based on laboratory test results. Because these important health care practitioners seldom have direct patient contact, their critical role in health care often goes unnoticed. We urge your support of allied health education so that America's medical laboratories will have the personnel needed to handle today's and tomorrow's demand for medical laboratory testing services.

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ASCP is a nonprofit medical specialty society representing 140,000 members, including board certified pathologists, other physicians, clinical scientists, cytotechnologists, histotechnologists, medical technologists and technicians. As the leading provider of continuing education for pathologists and medical laboratory personnel, ASCP enhances the quality of the profession through comprehensive education programs, publications and self-assessment materials.