April 2, 2020

Representative Peter Welch
Rayburn House Office Building, 2187
Washington, DC 20515

Representative David B. McKinley
Rayburn House Office Building, 2239
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Welch and McKinley,

The American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) appreciates your bipartisan leadership in introducing HR 5924 to address the workforce shortage of specialty physicians in rural America. ASTRO strongly supports this bill, with the addition of language clarifying that radiation oncologists would be among those medical specialties eligible for the student loan repayment programs created by the legislation.

ASTRO is the largest radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 10,000 members who specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies. As the leading organization in radiation oncology, biology and physics, the Society is dedicated to improving patient care through education, clinical practice, advancement of science and advocacy. ASTRO’s highest priority has always been ensuring patients receive the safest, most effective treatments.

Cancer incidence and mortality rates in the US are declining, but rural-urban differences in access and outcomes persist. Rural health care providers and their patients face many challenges in the delivery of care, including limited availability of physicians, treatments, transportation barriers, and financial issues among many other difficulties. These challenges often apply acutely to radiation oncology care in rural areas, where studies have long documented health disparities between rural patients and their urban/suburban counterparts. Among the most significant challenges facing rural radiation oncology care in rural areas is the ability to attract and retain radiation oncology physicians. While approximately 15 percent of Americans live in rural communities, less than 6 percent of radiation oncologists practice in these communities. In addition, the average age of radiation oncologists in rural areas is 58-years-old, compared to 51-years-old in urban areas, suggesting that the workforce shortage is likely to worsen without Congressional action.

ASTRO believes that HR 5924 is a critical first step to address the radiation oncology and specialist shortage in rural areas. Frequently, radiation oncologists treat cancer in a multidisciplinary fashion, requiring close coordination with other cancer specialists, such as surgeons and medical oncologists, where workforce shortages also exist. We recommend that the legislation clarify the definition of “specialty medicine physician” in section (h) to ensure that cancer specialists, such as radiation oncologists, are not inadvertently excluded from the loan repayment program. Due to the extensive and expensive training required of radiation oncologists, this legislation would help overcome a key barrier preventing radiation oncologists from practicing in rural communities.
Upon making the recommended the clarification, ASTRO would be proud to work with your offices and Congress to secure passage of HR 5924 to address shortages of specialty medicine physicians in rural America.

Sincerely,

Laura I. Thevenot
Chief Executive Officer