

Testimony from Dr. Alma Littles, Dean of the FSU College of Medicine

**“The Doctor Is Out: How Washington’s Rules Drove Physicians Out of
Medicine,”**

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3:30 P.M.

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today to share a perspective on an issue that is becoming increasingly urgent across our nation—physician burnout—an issue experienced by doctors who want nothing more than to care for their patients, yet find themselves pushed to the brink by the very system meant to support them.

Physicians enter medicine with a clear purpose: to heal, to serve, and to stand with patients in their most vulnerable moments. But today, that purpose is being overshadowed by unsustainable administrative burdens leading to record percentages of physician burnout. The American Psychiatric Association defines three core components of burnout:

1. Overwhelming exhaustion;
2. Depersonalization, along with feelings of cynicism and detachment; and
3. A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

We know physicians have a higher incidence of suicide when compared with other professionals in the United States; around 400 take their lives each year. And just as concerning, medical students and residents have rates of depression 15 to 30 percent higher than the general public. This is a national crisis. To address it, the National Academy of Medicine, the Association of American Medical Colleges and the American Medical Association are actively developing resources.

Physicians are leaving medicine not because they have lost their passion, but because the regulatory environment has made it nearly impossible to practice the way they were trained to. Physicians lose satisfaction when factors come between them and their patients.

The issue is not regulation itself. Physicians understand the need for oversight, accountability, and patient safety. The issue is the volume and complexity of mandates—documentation requirements, reporting systems, compliance checklists, and insurance rules and regulations that grow year after year in the face of reduced reimbursements and without regard for the time they consume or the strain they impose in the form of inability to make decisions based on training and science.

The consequences of burnout can be devastating.

Think about this: One physician leaving practice potentially leaves 2-3,000 patients without access to care.

Studies suggest that more than half of practicing physicians say they are burned out. We found this to be a real issue in Florida after becoming aware of several suicides among medical students, residents, and faculty.

But here is the hopeful part: this crisis is solvable. The medical schools in Florida came together to evaluate the support being provided to address the root causes of burnout. We used this data to share experiences and solutions.

Programs were developed that support wellness activities, and deliberate efforts were made to destigmatize seeking help in medical school, residency training, and practice. This included lobbying for a change in the licensure application regarding how questions about prior mental illness were asked and addressed. The survey of medical schools and residency programs confirmed that the schools were actively engaged in a variety of activities including:

- Incorporating mandatory wellness topics into the curriculum;
- Providing dedicated on-site counseling services;
- Offering online resources;
- Hosting financial aid/planning workshops; and

- Incorporating activities that prepare students for the impact of administrative burdens.

Since our founding 25 years ago, the Florida State University College of Medicine has recognized the threat of physician burnout and we hard-wired into our curriculum and extracurricular activities programs and activities to address it. We provide resources on sleep and stress management, weekly fitness classes, campus walks, and improved our on-site fitness room. A major suicide awareness and prevention program featured film screenings and a live panel discussion. Our six regional campuses across the state of Florida added their own wellness programs.

All of this is helpful, but we cannot lose sight of key components of the AMA's Physician Wellness program that includes the reduction of administrative burdens, reduction of stress drivers in organizations, and removal of regulations and technology requirements.

We need your help. You have the power to make a positive impact:

- By supporting regulatory reform.
- By promoting administrative simplification.
- By ensuring that federal policies strengthen—not strain—the physician workforce.
- And by recognizing that the best way to protect patients is to protect the people who care for them.

Addressing this issue is no longer an option, it is critical to ensuring access to care!

Thank you for your time, your attention, and your commitment to the future of healthcare. The path forward is clear. We simply need the will to take it. I look forward to continuing this conversation.