November 6, 2009

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative:

This weekend, the House of Representatives will take a historic vote on legislation designed to make real reforms in our nation's healthcare system. On behalf of the more than 1.4 million members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), I urge you to vote "Yes" on the Affordable Health Care for America Act (H.R. 3962).

Healthcare reform is a crucial ingredient in strengthening our country and the economy. The rising cost of healthcare puts a tremendous strain on families, businesses, state governments and the federal budget. In addition, millions of Americans are uninsured or are denied coverage because of pre-existing conditions." H.R. 3962 recognizes that this situation is unsustainable and offers promising solutions to enhance choice, coverage and competition; provide more affordable insurance plans; spur innovation; and make important investments in America's healthcare system. Finally, the legislation is crafted in a fiscally responsible manner that would not add to the budget deficit.

The AFT believes that the following four major issues are essential to real healthcare reform, and they are addressed in H.R. 3962:

Public Plan. We strongly support the establishment of a robust public health insurance plan that will bring down costs and guarantee high-quality, affordable healthcare for all. Giving everyone the choice of a strong public health insurance plan will inject needed competition into the market, drive down costs and improve quality across all plans. H.R. 3962 moves us closer to such an option because it establishes a national public plan to compete with the insurance industry. As this legislation moves forward, the AFT will continue to push for the strongest version of a public health insurance option to lower costs and ensure that everyone in the Exchange has access to high-quality healthcare.

Employer Responsibility. Employers currently provide coverage to 160 million Americans. The healthcare system cannot afford to expand healthcare coverage to uninsured Americans if the employer mandate is weak and allows employers to dump coverage. H.R. 3962 retains employer responsibility for providing health insurance for workers by requiring that medium and large companies with a payroll in excess of $500,000 provide a qualified health insurance option to their employees. If these employers do not provide that insurance, they must pay a penalty equal to 8 percent of their payroll to help provide coverage for the nation's uninsured. The AFT will continue to push for the strongest possible language requiring employers who fail to provide healthcare to pay a meaningful fee to help subsidize the cost of their employees' healthcare.

Affordability. Making healthcare more affordable for individuals and families is a priority for the AFT and must be a central goal in healthcare reform. H.R. 3962 goes a long way toward protecting working families from high premiums and excessive out-of-pocket costs. It does so by including premium protections to cover middle-class families earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level. We believe that the final package must include sufficient subsidies to make health insurance affordable for all Americans; the AFT is dedicated to achieving this goal.

Increased Taxation of Working Americans. The House bill recognizes that we should not force working people to pay more for the insurance they already have in the form of increased taxes on health insurance benefits. With income inequality at its highest in decades, Americans believe "shared responsibility" should require a larger contribution from those who are most able to pay and who benefited disproportionately from the 2001 Bush tax cuts. Even under the House bill, the richest Americans are asked to contribute less than was given away in those tax cuts. At the same time, a clear majority (80 percent) of Americans opposes taxing benefits. Whether the health insurance tax is on the worker, the employer or the health plan itself, the effect will be increased costs, not just for the "gold-plated, Cadillac" plans but for millions of working families that have employer-provided coverage. Workers, and the unions that negotiate on their behalf, frequently forgo pay increases in exchange for maintaining affordable healthcare coverage. We applaud the House leadership for recognizing that an additional tax would unfairly penalize workers who have employer-provided coverage. We will continue to fight with working Americans to ensure that the House's proposal in this area is included in the final bill passed by Congress.

Quality Staffing Standards. The AFT represents more than 70,000 nurses and healthcare workers, and we know that the issues they face day in and day out need to be addressed in the overall reform package. These factors affect the cost of care, quality outcomes and patient safety. The lack of regulatory guidelines on appropriate staffing levels for nurses and other direct caregivers increases medical errors and increases the potential for endangering patients. To this end, we are pleased that H.R. 3962 includes provisions that will lead to improving staffing standards in our nation's health facilities. The authors of this bill also understand that failing to recognize the concerns of healthcare workers will only increase the critical shortage of healthcare workers that our nation faces today. We are urging the Senate to address this vital issue in its bill.

Securing House passage of the Affordable Health Care for America Act will move us one step closer toward fulfilling President Obama's goal of securing high-quality, affordable healthcare for more Americans. However, much work remains to be done.

The AFT and our more than 1.4 million members will continue to do everything in our collective power to help our allies who are working tirelessly to make historic changes to our current healthcare system.

Thank you for considering our views on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Randi Weingarten
President