
Postsecondary Education & Workforce Committee

HB 1946

Brief Description: Creating the Washington health corps behavioral health scholarship program.

Sponsors: Representatives Eslick, Leavitt, Ryu, Slatter, Duerr, Ramos and Senn.

<p style="text-align: center;">Brief Summary of Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enacts the Behavioral Health Scholarship Program under the Washington Health Corps.

Hearing Date: 1/9/24

Staff: Saranda Ross (786-7068).

Background:

The Washington Health Corps was established in 2019 to encourage healthcare professionals to work in critical shortage areas. In exchange for service, healthcare professionals receive assistance with higher education in the form of loan repayment or conditional scholarships. The Washington Health Corps is an umbrella program under which four programs exist:

- the Health Professional Loan Repayment and Scholarship Program;
- the Behavioral Health Loan Repayment Program;
- the Nurse Educator Loan Repayment Program; and
- the Forensic Pathologist Loan Repayment Program.

The programs provide licensed professionals with repayment on all or a portion of participants' outstanding student loans in exchange for service at an eligible site. Eligible sites are healthcare facilities that provide comprehensive outpatient, ambulatory, and primary healthcare services.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Office of Student Financial Assistance (Office), created within and under the direction of the Washington Student Achievement Council, administers these programs in collaboration with the Department of Health (DOH) under the same structure and application process. Each program differs in the type of eligible licensed health professionals and eligible geographic shortage areas of service.

The Office, in consultation with the DOH and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), establishes annual conditional scholarship award amounts and required service obligations, and determines eligible education and training programs. The Office, the DOH, and the DSHS also determine eligible credentialed healthcare professions for conditional scholarships based on whether there is a shortage or insufficient availability of a credentialed profession so as to jeopardize patient care and pose a threat to the public health and safety, and based on the relative degree of shortages among professions.

In administering conditional scholarships, the Office selects participants, adopts rules and guidelines, and collects and manages repayments from participants who do not meet their service obligations. Should a participant fail to complete their service obligations, the participant must pay the unsatisfied portion of the principal and interest, which includes an equalization fee. The loan interest rate and repayment interest rate for conditional scholarships is limited to 2 percent.

The Office is required to make exceptions to the conditions for participation and repayment obligations should substantial circumstances beyond the control of a participant warrant such exceptions. Such substantial circumstances include: (1) a participant experiencing unforeseen emergencies or hardships that substantially affect the participant's ability to complete their service obligations; or (2) the participant is a service member of the armed forces, or is a spouse or dependent of a service member, who receives permanent change of station or deployment orders to move out-of-state or to a location that would create a hardship to complete the participant's service obligations. The Office is also required to reduce, or help to reduce, barriers that threaten a conditional scholarship participant's ability to complete their service obligations by offering wraparound services such as navigation support for public benefits, financial coaching, and access to food, housing, and childcare resources and referrals.

Summary of Bill:

The Behavioral Health Scholarship Program (Scholarship) is created under the Washington Health Corps for credentialed health professionals serving in underserved behavioral health areas. The Office of Student Financial Assistance (Office) must annually consider the best utilization of funding in determining awards for loan repayments and scholarships under the Behavioral Health Loan Repayment and Scholarship Program. The Office may use funds appropriated for the Behavioral Health Loan Repayment and Scholarship Program for loan repayment or scholarships, or both.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 2, 2024.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.