

FINAL BILL REPORT

HB 1946

C 369 L 24

Synopsis as Enacted

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

Sponsors: Representatives Eslick, Leavitt, Ryu, Slatter, Duerr, Ramos, Senn, Reed, Graham, Callan, Timmons, Macri, Paul, Harris, Lekanoff, Riccelli, Pollet and Davis.

House Committee on Postsecondary Education & Workforce

House Committee on Appropriations

Senate Committee on Higher Education & Workforce Development

Senate Committee on Ways & Means

Background:

The Washington Health Corps (Corps) was established to encourage health care professionals to work in critical shortage areas. In exchange for service, health care professionals receive assistance with higher education in the form of loan repayment or conditional scholarships. The 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 health care facilities that provide comprehensive outpatient, ambulatory, and primary health care services. 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.

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, 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 DOH, in consultation with the Office and the DSHS, determines eligible credentialed health care professions and identifies underserved behavioral health areas for conditional scholarships based on whether there is a shortage or insufficient availability of a credentialed profession that jeopardizes patient care and poses 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 the participant's 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 the participant's 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:

The Behavioral Health Scholarship Program (Scholarship) is created under the Corps for credentialed health professionals serving in underserved behavioral health areas. In administering and operating the Scholarship, the Office, the DOH, and the DSHS retain their respective duties granted under the Health Professional Scholarship Program.

The 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.

Votes on Final Passage:

House 97 0

Senate 49 0

Effective: June 6, 2024