

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1946

As Reported by House Committee On:
Postsecondary Education & Workforce

Title: An act relating to creating the Washington health corps behavioral health scholarship program.

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.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Postsecondary Education & Workforce: 1/9/24, 1/12/24 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Enacts the Behavioral Health Scholarship Program under the Washington Health Corps.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION & WORKFORCE

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Slatter, Chair; Entenman, Vice Chair; Reed, Vice Chair; Ybarra, Ranking Minority Member; Chandler, Jacobsen, Klicker, Leavitt, Nance, Pollet, Schmidt and Timmons.

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

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professionals receive assistance with higher education in the form of loan repayment or conditional scholarships. The Washington Health Corps (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. 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 DOH, in consultation with the Office and the DSHS, determines eligible credentialed healthcare professions and identifies underserved behavioral health areas 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 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, including:

- establishing annual conditional scholarship award amounts and required service obligations;
- determining eligible education and training programs;
- determining eligible credentialed healthcare professions;
- selecting participants;
- adopting rules and guidelines;
- collecting and managing repayments from participants who do not meet their service obligations; and
- making exceptions to the conditions for participation and repayment obligations should substantial circumstances beyond the control of a participant warrant such exceptions.

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.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) While there are other scholarships in the medical field, there is nothing to the extent this bill creates. Behavioral health professionals across the state report ongoing issues of staff turnover and the importance of a well-trained workforce. We cannot just focus on recruitment but must also emphasize retention. In addition to improving both, this bill also helps diversify the workforce. Less than 20 percent of psychologists and just over 10 percent of psychiatrists are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. Further, behavioral

health professionals are widely inaccessible to marginalized communities, which leads to increased inequities in the healthcare system. This bill will increase accessibility to disadvantaged communities because it requires recipients to serve in rural and underserved areas.

(Opposed) This bill should be amended to encourage scholarships be offered to behavioral health practitioners who support and intend on practicing human rights–based mental health treatment that does not focus on coercion or force, or psychiatric drugs as a primary effort. The bill should encompass a broad range of candidates, taking into account a treatment approach that individuals want to receive.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Carolyn Eslick, prime sponsor; Vaughnetta J. Barton, University of Washington School of Social Work; Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children; Anna Nepomuceno, NAMI Washington and Patients Coalition of Washington; David Sullivan; Breck Lebegue and Kika Kau, Washington State Psychiatric Association; and Becky Thompson, Washington Student Achievement Council.

(Opposed) Kathleen Wedemeyer, Citizens Commission on Human Rights.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.