

SENATE BILL REPORT

HB 1946

As of February 24, 2024

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: Passed House: 2/8/24, 97-0.

Committee Activity: Higher Education & Workforce Development: 2/14/24, 2/21/24 [DP-WM].

Ways & Means: 2/24/24.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes the behavioral health scholarship program under the Washington Health Corps.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Nobles, Chair; Hansen, Vice Chair; Holy, Ranking Member; Hawkins and Randall.

Staff: Alicia Kinne-Clawson (786-7407)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

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.

Staff: Michele Alishahi (786-7433)

Background: Washington Health Corps. 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 (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.

Behavioral Health Loan Repayment Program. The Behavioral Health Loan Repayment Program is a program under the Corps umbrella for credentialed health professionals serving in underserved behavioral health areas. An underserved behavioral health area is defined as a geographic area, population, or facility that has a shortage of health care professionals providing behavioral health services as determined by the Department of Health.

Summary of Bill: The Behavioral Health Scholarship Program is created under the Corps for credentialed health professionals serving in underserved behavioral health areas. The Office of Student Financial Assistance (office) is responsible for administration of the program. For the behavioral health loan repayment and scholarship programs, the office must:

- select credentialed health care participants;
- determine eligible professions;
- establish award amounts;
- establish the required service obligation;
- determine eligible education and training programs for the scholarship; and
- annually establish the total amount of funding to be awarded for loan repayments and scholarships.

The Behavioral Health Scholarship is a conditional scholarship. Scholarship recipients incur an obligation to repay the scholarship, with penalty and interest, unless they serve the required service obligation in a health professional shortage area or an underserved behavioral health area.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Higher Education & Workforce Development):

PRO: Last year when we were hearing all the trials and tribulations of mental health practitioners. One idea to address that was to use a conditional scholarship. People were reluctant to participate because the interest rate is cumbersome. We are believing that this is going to help. This is based on an idea that passed last year and needs refinement in the RCW. The cost of education can be a discouraging factor for students thinking about pursuing this degree. A behavioral health conditional scholarship will help. WA is 40th across the country for meeting the needs of youth mental health. Three quarters of the kids on apple health who need substance use resources cannot access them. We need an adequate behavioral health workforce. We lost one third of our youth behavioral health workforce during the pandemic. The behavioral health workforce lacks in numbers and diversity. Due to financial barriers behavioral health professions have been inaccessible to diverse communities. This bill will increase mental health services where it's most needed.

Persons Testifying (Higher Education & Workforce Development): PRO: Representative Carolyn Eslick, Prime Sponsor; Vaughnnetta J. Barton, UW School of Social Work - Washington State Behavioral Health Workforce Development Initiative; Anna Nepomuceno, NAMI Washington and Patients Coalition of Washington; Beth Ebel, WA Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics; Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children; Christina Minor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Higher Education & Workforce Development): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means): PRO: This bill is a priority for the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Work Group. While retaining individuals in the behavioral health workforce is critical, we need to build the pipeline to get more people in the workforce. Conditional scholarships are an important way to do this. Loan repayment is important, but we also need to be focusing on conditional scholarships as an important component to the critical behavioral health workforce. Our state not only has a behavioral health workforce that lacks numbers, but it also lacks in diversity. Over 80 percent of psychiatrists are white and only ten percent are Black, Native American, or Hispanic. Rural and agricultural communities are also struggling to access behavioral health care. The scholarships in this bill would make behavioral health professions more accessible to those who couldn't otherwise enter the workforce. Offering conditional scholarships through this bill will enable our state to be well positioned to create a more diverse core of clinicians to address this critical workforce shortage.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Vaughnetta J. Barton, UW School of Social Work - Washington State Behavioral Health Workforce Development Initiative; Laurie Lippold, Partners for Our Children; Anna Nepomuceno , NAMI WA.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.