



Position Paper: Expand the State’s Health Professional Loan Repayment Program

The Legislature should increase the state’s Health Professional Loan Repayment Program funding by \$9 million for the 2017-19 biennium, ensuring that Washington State has an adequate workforce to care for the underserved, including those getting care in an integrated setting.

Community health centers (CHCs) are at the forefront of providing care to low income patients, including those who have gained coverage through the Medicaid expansion. To ensure that CHCs can meet the needs of their patients, they need a reliable workforce of primary care health professionals. To help meet that need, we propose a \$9 million budget increase to the state’s Health Professional Loan Repayment Program. These funds will reduce the health care workforce shortage in the state’s underserved areas and support awards to non-prescribing mental health professions—professions that were added to the program this year. These professionals are a critical part of the CHCs’ team-based approach to integrating behavioral health into primary care, which remove barriers so patients can recover and thrive.

The Unmet Need in Washington State and in Community Health Centers

Washington State has made great strides in ensuring that people have health coverage with both the Medicaid expansion and qualified health plans offered on the Health Benefit Exchange. Some of the newly covered were already getting care without coverage, but many are now seeking care either for the first time or after a long gap, increasing overall demand for care.

This rise in demand is outpacing the supply of health care professionals. By 2030, Washington State will need an additional 1,695 primary care physicians. This is a 30 percent increase in the state’s current 5,504 primary care physician workforce. The Washington Dental Service Foundation estimates that about 14 percent of Washingtonians live in a dental Health Professional Shortage Area. This workforce shortage is not limited to physicians and dentists. The Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board projects significant shortfalls in the number of physician assistants and advanced registered nurse practitioners.

This situation is even more challenging for CHCs, which struggle to recruit and retain primary care providers, mental health practitioners, and dental professionals to treat their complex patients. They are competing with private clinics and larger delivery systems that often offer better recruitment and retention incentives. In addition, fewer medical students are choosing to go into primary care, which creates a larger systematic problem around primary care access. Workforce challenges at CHCs include:

- 47 physician vacancies (MDs / DOs)
- 44 mid-level medical provider vacancies (PAs / ARNPs)
- 7 pharmacist vacancies
- 32 dentist vacancies
- 30 nurse vacancies
- 16 dental hygienist vacancies
- 43 non-prescribing mental health provider vacancies

Loan Repayment Assistance Provides Immediate Results

To help recruit and retain essential providers for the primary care delivery system, CHCs have relied on loan repayment assistance. Both the federal and state governments have programs that allow health care sites, including CHCs, located in underserved areas or serving underserved populations, to provide loan repayment awards. But this is not enough!

The state's Health Professional Loan Repayment Program provides eligible primary care health professionals up to \$25,000 per year for a minimum of three years of service caring for patients in critical shortage areas. In 2015, the Legislature recognized that loan repayment assistance is a key part of assuring that Washingtonians in underserved communities have access to health care by reversing the devastating program cuts that happened four years prior.

Patient Impact of Increasing the State's Investment in the Loan Repayment Program

The state's current investment supports loan repayment awards in the 2015-16 application cycle. One hundred eighty eight (188) health care providers applied for loan repayment assistance and the state was able to offer 75 awards—meeting only 40 percent of the demand. Recipients include 19 physicians, 27 mid-level medical providers, and 6 dentists, who could potentially care for *an additional 61,200 medical and 9,000 dental patients*. This will help address but not solve the workforce shortage in underserved communities—and the funds do not account for non-prescribing mental health professionals, which have been newly added to the program for the 2016-17 application cycle.

Build on the Success of the Existing Loan Repayment Program

An additional investment of \$9 million will ensure that more health care professionals who are interested in working in an underserved area or caring for underserved populations can make that decision without worrying about how they will pay back their educational loans. It will also enable underserved Washingtonians that now have health coverage to access care.

Loan Repayment Works!

"[The Loan Repayment Program] draws many new clinicians to our practice. Many clinicians continue working after their repayment, such as myself. I have continued to work at the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic in Toppenish as has my fellow pharmacist...Though I really enjoy my work setting and my clientele, I can admit that the repayment program opened my eyes to this site. I think that once you can draw clinicians to the sites, it allows them to see the need and the rewarding nature of the work, and makes them want to stay..."

[Elizabeth Jensen, Pharmacist]

As the state moves towards integrated behavioral health care in the primary care setting, it is important that we have the workforce to support this effort. This includes non-prescribing mental health professionals such as master's level clinical psychologists, marriage and family therapists, mental health counselors, and social workers. They are now eligible for the program, starting with the 2016-17 application cycle. Adding these newly eligible professionals will increase competition among providers for scarce loan repayment funds. If the state wants to sustain the workforce gains made this year and extend that gain to mental health professionals, an additional investment in this proven program is needed.