



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

Legislative Testimony

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Senate Committees on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Health and
Higher Education

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By

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SB 1404 – RELATING TO LOAN REPAYMENT FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Chairs Baker and Kim, Vice Chairs Chang and Kidani, and members of the committees:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in **strong support** of SB 1404, provided that its passage does not replace or adversely impact priorities as indicated in our BOR Approved Budget. This measure permits continuation of the Hawai'i State Loan Repayment program that supports payments of educational debt for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, psychologists, social workers, marriage and family counselors and nurses who work for non-profit organizations in federally designated health professional shortage areas of Hawai'i or in a geographic area of Hawai'i found to be underserved. This program is made possible through a grant from the federal government but requires a local dollar for dollar state match.

Hawai'i has a shortage of just under 800 doctors, and almost all other types of primary care and behavioral healthcare workers. Without these healthcare providers, the people of Hawai'i do not have access to the healthcare they need. The shortage is most acute for those on neighbor islands and those with the least resources. One of the fastest and least expensive methods for recruiting providers is through loan repayment. The Hawai'i State Loan Repayment program has helped 43 health care providers since its inception in 2012. Currently, the Loan Repayment Program supports 20 providers in Hawai'i. Of the program graduates, almost 2/3 are still practicing in underserved areas of Hawai'i.

In 2016, 64% of the John A Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) residents and fellows had a current student loan burden. The average student loan indebtedness of our JABSOM MD residents/fellows is \$235,000, with some residents having loans in the \$300,000-600,000 range. These loans, with average minimum monthly payment of \$500, begin repayment while in residency training, in addition to the high cost of living,

rent and other living expenses. The high cost of college and medical education results in large student loan debt -- which detracts from physicians choosing primary care specialties and choosing to practice in underserved or rural communities.

If a physician does his or her medical school AND residency (or Graduate Medical Education or GME) training here in Hawai'i, about 80% of them stay in Hawai'i to practice. Having loan repayment options tied to commitments to serve in neighbor-island, rural and underserved populations will help to reduce the physician shortages in those areas. The loan repayment program has played an important role in bringing needed physicians and healthcare providers to underserved areas.

SB 1404 requests \$350,000 for loan repayment for the above listed health professions. However, we respectfully request that the eligible professions be expanded to include at least social work and registered nursing as these are much needed health care providers in rural areas. The funds provided will be matched dollar for dollar from other funding sources and be provided to reduce the debt of our healthcare providers working in areas of need. This will allow for 20 new healthcare providers a year to work in underserved areas across Hawai'i and receive at least \$35,000 a year in loan repayment for practicing at least two years in an area of need.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.