



Texas Society for Clinical Social Work



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August 20, 2020

House Select Committee on Mass Violence Prevention and Community Safety,

Together, the Texas Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers – Texas Chapter, Texas Association for Marriage and Family Therapists, Texas Counseling Association, and Texas Society for Clinical Social Work represent over 75,000 licensed mental health professionals in the State of Texas. We are writing today to remind the members of this committee of the importance of the Mental Health Loan Repayment Program.

A robust mental health workforce is needed to keep communities free of violence. Mental health professionals are trained to alleviate risk factors, decreasing the likelihood of future violence. Violence is more than just mass shootings, but also includes suicide, domestic violence, and community violence, which each deserve attention. Mental health professionals are here to help. However, the state needs to take steps to support and encourage the mental health workforce to ensure Texans are able to access services before a violent act occurs.

Texas ranks second in the nation for the highest number of Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas.<sup>1</sup> One way to strengthen the state's mental health workforce is to continue funding the Mental Health Loan Repayment Program, which was created in the 84<sup>th</sup> legislative session by Senator Schwertner and Representative Zerwas. The program offers loan repayments to licensed mental health professionals working in an MHPSA.

New data collected by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shows that it is currently incentivizing about 230 mental health professionals to work in shortage areas and correctional facilities. The Texas legislature has historically allocated 2.7 million dollars to THECB per biennium for the program. In 2018, THECB was awarded federal match dollars at \$750,000 per year for four years. With minor costs but major impact, we implore you – at a minimum – to keep the program at its current funding level to better meet the needs of Texans, keeping communities healthy and safe.

In addition to funding the Mental Health Loan Repayment Program, we ask that telehealth audio-only telephone policies allowed through the COVID-19 pandemic be made permanent to increase access to mental health care across the state. After maximizing the size and distribution of the mental health workforce, the legislature must ensure that Texans can access the current workforce through telehealth. However, many Texans in rural and underserved areas are unable to access reliable broadband or technology needed for video-chatting. Thus audio-only telephone is a safe and effective way to provide mental health treatment across the state, particularly for people experiencing domestic violence who need a safe way to communicate with a mental health professional. While Texas communities continue to build strength and resiliency from violence, access to mental health treatment must be part of the ongoing conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> US Health Resources and Services Administration. Health Workforce: Shortage Areas.  
<https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/shortage-areas>

Sincerely,

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