

## **BILL ANALYSIS**

S.B. 532  
By: West  
Higher Education  
Committee Report (Unamended)

### **BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

A loan repayment assistance program for mental health professionals was established in 2015 and has aimed to address the need for mental health professionals in Texas. However, it has not accepted new applicants in the past three fiscal years due to limited funding and program requirements. In previous sessions, the state has allotted roughly \$2 million per biennium for the program, limiting the amount of applicants that can be accepted. The program also requires a mental health professional to serve five years in a mental health professional shortage area to receive the full amount of assistance, and this long period of time contributes to the backlog.

According to Understanding Houston, out of the Texans in need of a mental health professional in 2021, only 32.9 percent have received treatment, indicating a continuing need for additional mental health practitioners in Texas. S.B. 532 seeks to meet that need and increase the efficacy of loan repayment assistance for mental health professionals by providing for repayment assistance of an eligible professional's loan to be disbursed over the course of a three-year period instead of a five-year period. The bill also extends the program to professionals working in local mental health authorities and state hospitals.

### **CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT**

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

### **RULEMAKING AUTHORITY**

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

### **ANALYSIS**

S.B. 532 amends the Education Code to lower from five to three years the cap on the number of years a mental health professional may receive professional education loan repayment assistance under related statutory provisions. Accordingly, the bill raises the authorized annual amount of repayment assistance, determined by applying 33.33 percent to the maximum total amount of assistance for each of the years the mental health professional is eligible. The bill also authorizes a mental health professional to establish eligibility for the loan repayment assistance, as an alternative to the existing eligibility requirements that are based on practice in a mental health professional shortage area, by doing the following:

- applying to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB);
- providing mental health services to patients in a state hospital or to individuals receiving community-based mental health services from a local mental health authority; and
- completing one, two, or three consecutive years of practice providing mental health services to such patients or individuals in Texas.

These changes apply only to a person who first establishes eligibility for loan repayment assistance on the basis of an application submitted on or after the bill's effective date. A person who first establishes eligibility on the basis of an application submitted before that date is governed by the law in effect at the time the application was submitted, and the former law is continued in effect for that purpose.

S.B. 532 requires the THECB to administer the loan repayment program for mental health professionals in a manner that, as program openings occur, allows for the continuous approval or disapproval of applications, determination of applicant eligibility, and acceptance of eligible applicants into the program.

**EFFECTIVE DATE**

September 1, 2023.