

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMPILATION OF PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Submitted to the Committee on Higher Education
For SB 532

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Hearing Date: May 15, 2023 10:00 AM

Marilyn Hartman, Advocate

Member and Advocate, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Central Texas
Austin, TX

Given the shortage of providers in the mental health system, it is important to have incentives such as loan repayment. Right now, for example, there is only one psychiatrist in the outpatient clinics of the Austin LMHA, Integral Care, for thousands of clients; the rest are being serviced by NPs, APRNs, etc. which are also in short supply. A psychiatrist should be available for the most severe cases of mental illness, and this is not the case, which is a travesty. In addition, about 1/3 of the state hospital beds are offline due to staffing shortages, adding to the current crisis in Texas. Please support SB 532 in order to increase the mental health providers in state hospitals and LMHAs. Thank you for our consideration.

Alison Mohr Boleware, Director of Policy
Hogg Foundation for Mental Health
Austin, TX

SB 532 (West) would change the existing Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals (LRPMHP) program length from five years to three years and would extend eligibility to every local mental health authority (LMHA) and state hospital facility. Currently the program is only for professionals working in designated underserved areas. However, that leaves out several LMHAs and state hospitals located in suburban and urban areas.

According to our analysis, currently no state hospitals are designated as shortage areas, so SB 532 would bring ALL 9 state hospitals into the program. It would also bring 29 additional local mental health authorities (LMHAs) into the program.

Meeting the needs of Texans with mental health and substance use conditions requires a robust and diverse behavioral health workforce, yet nearly the entire state is designated as a mental health shortage area. The LRPMHP has been extremely successful in addressing this challenge since its creation in 2016. 270 professionals have already participated in the program with 98 professionals currently involved. The purpose of the program was to encourage qualified mental health professionals to practice in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area (MHPSA) and provide mental health care services to Medicaid and/or CHIP recipients. The LRPMHP works to address the workforce shortage by offering loan repayment as an incentive to working in an underserved area.

Currently, participants agree to provide five years of service and are awarded amount increases each year, known as a “stairstep approach”. SB 532 would reduce the program to three years of service and level the amount, so a program participant would have access to more funds sooner in the program. This change would allow the loan repayment to be a stronger incentive to new professionals who are weighing options and deciding where to work. Further, the change would ensure the new funds are used and the professionals working in areas of highest need remain prioritized.

Thanks to a generous increase in the HB 1 budget to \$28 million, there is a sizeable amount to distribute across the state. Mental health and substance use stakeholders want to ensure the program is effective with these new funds and appreciate the efforts to fund and support the program.

Sydney Carter
Network of Behavioral Health Providers
Houston, TX

NBHP supports this bill.