

My Turn: To address health worker shortage, increase funding of State Loan Repayment Program



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Gov. Chris Sununu and the New Hampshire Legislature worked tirelessly to address the opioid crisis and health care workforce shortage this legislative session.

After a whirlwind month of hearings and work sessions by the Senate Finance Committee, the budget passed the Senate and could be headed to a committee of conference. Now is the time to support a proven and effective program to address the health care workforce shortage and increase health care services for all Granite Staters: the State Loan Repayment Program.

Health care employers across the state struggle to find qualified workers, including primary care doctors, nurses, nursing assistants and behavioral health clinicians, to address the needs of their communities. A shortage of health care workers impacts access to all types of health care services: from services for the treatment of substance misuse and depression, to services for the treatment of chronic physical conditions such as asthma and diabetes. A shortage in health care providers means waiting weeks to get services, driving long distances to access care or going without care.

Primary health care providers, including community health centers in medically underserved areas, currently have 126 open clinical positions, and the state's community mental health centers have more than 170 open clinical positions. There is little doubt that filling these positions will positively impact Granite Staters' ability to access health care services.

Our governor and Legislature are well aware of the difficulty that New Hampshire health care employers have in attracting and retaining staff, particularly because of our proximity to the greater Boston area.

Last year, a New Hampshire workforce commission recommended that "the Legislature should support higher education through tuition reimbursement, scholarships, low interest loans and loan forgiveness for all individuals pursuing health care professions."

Everyone agrees that we need to find practical solutions to recruit and retain health care workers. Many health care workers express how important loan repayment assistance is in helping them to stay in medically underserved communities where their services are desperately needed. The State Loan Repayment Program is the most credible and successful tool employers have to attract and keep health care workers in our state.

Currently, there are 23 health care workers on the State Loan Repayment Program's waitlist, and they are unable to enroll due to a shortage of funds. The reality is that some of these workers will decide to leave New Hampshire if they cannot get help with their high student loan debt.

By increasing the funding to this program by \$1.1 million per year, more than 50 health care workers, such as nurse practitioners, primary care physicians and behavioral health counselors, will have access to student loan assistance and New Hampshire citizens will have greater access to health care.

The Student Loan Repayment Program is our opportunity to encourage the next generation to make New Hampshire their home. There is a reason why the business and health care communities strongly support an increase to the State Loan Repayment Program: because the program attracts and keeps health care workers in our state, increases access to health care, creates a strong, healthy workforce and strengthens our economy.

We sincerely hope that \$1.1 million per year will be added to the State Loan Repayment Program.

(Tess Stack Kuenning is president and chief executive officer of Bi-State Primary Care Association.)