



Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

67th Montana Legislature

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TO: Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee
FROM: Sue O'Connell, Legislative Research Analyst
DATE: May 2, 2022
RE: March Meeting Follow-up/Background Information for Work Session Topics

This memorandum follows up on some questions raised by committee members in March and also provides background on some topics that were identified for the May 13 work session on the mental health studies.

1. Loan Repayment Programs

Several loan repayment programs exist, at both the federal and state levels, to encourage health care providers to work in certain geographic areas of the state or in certain settings:

- **Institutional Nursing Incentive Program:** Under 20-26-1511, MCA, the state will reimburse up to \$15,000 of a student loan balance for registered nurses who work at the Montana State Hospital or Montana Prison. Reimbursement is capped at \$3,750 a year for up to four years, and payments are made at the end of every 1-year period that the person works at the prison or State Hospital.

The program began in Fiscal Year 2010 and is funded with general fund dollars. The highest number of nurses participated in FY 2013, when 14 State Hospital and six prison nurses received payments. The lowest number of reimbursements have occurred in the past two fiscal years, with two State Hospital and three prison nurses receiving payments under the program.

- **Montana Rural Physician Incentive Program:** Created by the Legislature in 1991, this program pays up to \$150,000 over a 5-year period to physicians, including psychiatrists, who practice full time in rural or medically underserved areas of the state. Reduced payments are available to doctors who practice less than full time.

The program is funded through an assessment paid by medical students participating in the Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho (WWAMI) and Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) medical education programs.

- **National Health Service Corps State Loan Repayment Program:** This federal-state program currently provides up to \$15,000 a year to help a wide variety of providers with their student loan debt. Recipients must work in an approved practice site that is located in a federally designated Health Professional Shortage Area. Awards are made for an initial period of 2 years, and providers may be eligible for up to two 1-year continuations of their awards.

The following behavioral health professionals are eligible to apply for the competitive awards:

- clinical or counseling psychologists;
- clinical social workers;
- clinical professional counselors;
- marriage and family therapists; and
- psychiatric nurse practitioners.

States can choose the level of loan repayment they will make. Federal guidelines set the maximum loan repayment at \$25,000 per year. The federal government pays half of the cost of the program, and the state and local communities must match that amount. Montana has used tobacco settlement interest funds to support the program.

2. ESAA Suggestion re Mental Health Coordinators

At the committee's November meeting, representatives of the Eastern Service Area Authority (ESAA) suggested that the committee introduce legislation requiring local boards of health to improve behavioral health in their counties.

Section 50-2-116, MCA, establishes the powers and duties of local boards of health. A requirement involving behavioral health could be added to this section.

The ESAA recommended that counties have or share a part or full-time employee whose duties would include coordinating behavioral health matters, fostering cooperation among providers and consumers, and serving as an information source for consumers and providers.

If a bill draft required the hiring or sharing of a new employee, it may trigger the provisions of 1-2-112, MCA, involving unfunded mandates. That law prohibits the Legislature from passing a law requiring a local government to perform a new activity or service that involves the expenditure of additional funds without providing a means of funding the activity. The requirement isn't triggered if the new activity involves "an insubstantial amount that can be readily absorbed into the budget of an existing program" — an amount defined as the lesser of 1 mill levied on taxable property or \$10,000. If the cost is higher and the Legislature does not provide a means of covering the cost, the legislation proposing the new service must explicitly state that the provisions of 1-2-112 are to be superseded.

3. Education/Training for Mental Health Workers

At the March 4 meeting regarding the notice of Immediate Jeopardy issued for the Montana State Hospital, committee members discussed the need for workforce training and asked for more information on what other committees or entities may be doing to develop interest in and prepare people for health care jobs, particularly those in the behavioral health field.

At the middle school and high school levels, the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) supports career and technical education programs across the state, including health science classes designed to give students skills they need to enter the health care workforce directly out of school or to continue their education at the college level. The OPI website says Montana has more than 450 approved career and technical education programs across the state.

OPI also works with career and technology student organizations, and the 2011 Legislature authorized and funded grants to schools to support those organizations. The Montana Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) holds statewide events and participates in national events to develop leadership skills among students interested in health professions.

At the post-secondary level, the Montana University System offers a number of health education programs for health professionals at all levels. It also collaborates with the Montana Area Health Education Center and stakeholders to gauge workforce education needs. A multi-sector working group has been meeting to develop health care workforce development recommendations for consideration by the Board of Regents.

The University System provided three documents, included in the meeting binders, related to its health care workforce efforts:

- Selection of Health Professions Initiatives
- Opportunities for Systemwide Action – Healthcare Workforce Development
- Montana Rural Physician Incentive Program handout

Finally, the Montana Department of Labor and Industry supports development of the workforce through programs to train an employer's existing workers, retrain workers to enter high-demand fields, support apprenticeship programs, provide workforce development services to unemployed workers, and provide grants to employers to defray the costs of hiring or employing individuals who are eligible for the Medicaid expansion program.

A separate briefing paper by Legislative Research Analyst Erin Sullivan provides more detail on these programs.