



Alaska Dental Society, Inc.

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The Honorable Paul Seaton, Chairman
House Education Committee
State Capitol Rm. 102
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Rep. Seaton and Committee Members:

On behalf of the members of the Alaska Dental Society I'm writing to urge passage of HB235 by your committee.

HB235 and its companion bill SB 174 will establish new funding and program guidelines for Alaska's participation in the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE). This bill will provide funding under the WICHE program for a partial tuition incentive for Alaskan residents to attend healthcare education programs not offered in Alaska: dentistry, pharmacy and optometry. The program would provide support in the form of a low interest loan that would be partially forgiven if the graduate returns to Alaska and an additional amount would be forgiven if the graduate practices in an underserved area or provides a percentage of care under the Medicaid system.

Alaska has long faced a shortage of healthcare providers in rural areas. A rapidly graying workforce and lack of providers to replace retiring practitioners is quickly leading to a shortage in non-rural areas. The problem has become especially acute in Southeast. Petersburg has lost one of its two dentists, Wrangell has lost both of its private dentists and Ketchikan has lost one of its five private dentists. All sought replacement dentists for several years but ultimately were forced to retire without a dentist to take over their practices. This problem is not isolated to Southeast, however, it is merely riding the crest of the wave.

The cost to attend professional school has rapidly escalated resulting in heavy loan repayment burdens for graduating professionals. This forces new graduates to choose practice location based economic choices. In 44-four states there are one or more incentive programs for health professionals – Alaska is one of 6 states without a program. Encouraging Alaskan residents to seek careers in healthcare fields will pay several dividends. Returning Alaskan residents are more likely to remain in Alaska for their practicing careers providing a stable source of healthcare providers. In a troubled economy healthcare fields provide stable, well paying jobs and healthcare providers will employ additional people providing an economic boost for communities. Smaller communities without adequate healthcare professionals will continue to see population drift to larger communities and out of the state due to real and perceived inadequacies.

Respectfully yours

Gary A. Moeller, DDS
President, Alaska Dental Society