

Liz Clement

From: Mary Sullivan [msullivan@akeela.org]
Int: Monday, March 07, 2011 3:43 PM
Cc: Rep. Bob Herron
Subject: Shelley Hughes
HB 78

Re: Support for HB 78 Incentives for Certain Medical Providers

March, 07, 2011

Dear Representative Herron:

Thank you for your tireless work on behalf of Alaskans and their best interests. My name is Mary Sullivan and I'm the program manager of the Seniors Behavioral Health Coalition, facilitated by Akeela Inc. The SBHC is made up of senior service providers, senior citizens, private business and state and tribal entities and is dedicated to prevent older adult behavioral health problems, as well as to ensure the full continuum of care for this population. Because the health care workforce shortage in Alaska is reducing health care access for our state's residents, the Senior Behavioral Health Coalition strongly supports HB 78 to establish a loan repayment and incentive program to allow Alaska to compete with the lower 48 in recruitment of providers from a shrinking national pool.

The members of the SBHC feel that ensuring health care access especially to seniors is a key protective factor against the development of behavioral health problems in later life. HB 78 would help to recruit qualified providers both in primary care, and in the ancillary services (such as social work) that are often needed with the medically fragile and those experiencing chronic conditions, such as those that many older adults experience. Access early and often to these ancillary and primary care services means that the development of more costly diseases and behavioral problems are more likely to be prevented. However, with the workforce shortage, access to much needed services is extremely impeded and in some cases impossible. Older adults already face challenges with access to primary care due to the reimbursement rates of Medicare, and the workforce shortage makes it doubly difficult for our elders, who worked very hard all their lives, to get the health care they need and have earned the right to deserve. Therefore, the SBHC feels that HB 78 is a wise choice for Alaska with its aging population, and is also a fiscally responsible role for government to fill in helping make Alaska a desirable place of work for these hard to fill health care positions.

With alarming and rising vacancy rates, Alaska is posed for a crisis without intervention. Alaska is one of only six states without a state-sponsored support-for-service program such as a loan repayment and incentive program and is losing ground. The competition for recruitment of providers is very difficult. Currently only 2% of medical students nationally are choosing the primary care field; more than 90 pharmacists vacancies exist in Alaska; many communities have inadequate access to dentists; physician assistants and nurse practitioners are increasingly difficult to recruit; nurses, dental hygienists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, and physical therapists are all in short supply in Alaska.

The Alaska Health Care Professions Loan Repayment & Incentive Program provides an important part of the solution to the workforce shortage Alaska faces. The proposal was developed after careful review of national studies of best practices for workforce recruitment and retention and input from stakeholders statewide, including consideration of factors unique to Alaska. More cost-efficient and results-producing than other methods, loan repayment and incentives have been shown to effectively help alleviate shortage problems in other states. HB 78 establishes a loan repayment and incentive program customized for Alaska and will provide much needed relief for our state.

The Senior Behavioral Health Coalition supports HB 78 and feels it is an important and needed piece of legislation. Your work on behalf of Alaska's seniors is very appreciated.

Respectfully,

Mary Sullivan

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