

March 31, 2011

Dear House Finance Committee members:

March is Social Work Appreciation Month – and a wonderful time to hold a hearing on an important bill impacting my profession’s future, HB 78.

My name is Marie Lavigne and I am a licensed clinical social worker, board certified in oncology and a proud alumni of the University of Alaska School of Social Work, where I earned my degree and student loans. As I will be serving patients at the Cancer Center during your hearing, I am submitting written testimony to express my support for HB 78.

As Chair of the UAA School of Social Work Community Advisory, I want to express our support of efforts such as HB 78, to develop creative incentives to help fill the gap in countless vacant health care provider positions – which include masters trained, clinical licensed social workers and other health professionals across Alaska.

Like most of my colleagues who earned an MSW at the University of Alaska, student loans helped to pay my tuition. Graduate financing for my beloved field of practice is very limited. Despite considerable fundraising by our UAA Social Work Advisory and community partners over the years to endow several scholarships (average award \$500), bachelor and masters trained social workers finance their own education. In fact, I have refinanced my loans to make them affordable till I am age 65. It’s rather discouraging, that I will be paying my own loans while trying to finance my children’s higher education and save for my retirement, in a field such as social work that offers modest salaries. Incentives such as loan repayment can help make the investment of education and service to the community a win-win for students, professionals and communities.

As you will hear in testimony by countless providers today, we have a growing health care shortage that is being compounded by an age wave bringing with it retirements of experienced health care professionals compounded by increased demand for care of our elders and Alaskans living with chronic or life limiting health conditions, such as cancer.

In response to this health care challenge, HB 78 creates the Alaska Health Care Professions Loan Repayment and Incentive Program which offers a valuable solution for Alaska. This can help quickly reduce the shortage by filling vacant health care provider positions throughout the state with both new and experienced health care professionals. It’s an important investment the Alaskan legislature can make this session.

Alaskans continues to learn and develop their professional skills in health care in Alaska. Let’s invest in this valuable sector of the economy through HB 78.

Thank you for your vote in favor of HB 78.

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