

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Sponsor Statement SB 139 – Incentives for Certain Medical Providers

Alaska is facing a serious shortage of healthcare practitioners, especially in the rural areas of our state, and it is projected to worsen significantly in the next few decades. Senate Bill 139 is intended to address this issue by establishing a program to immediately begin filling the vacant healthcare practitioner positions throughout the state.

This legislation will establish an incentive program in the Department of Health and Social Services. The program is designed to attract healthcare practitioners to Alaska. Currently, the WWAMI program serves a similar purpose by giving WWAMI medical students the option of paying off a portion of their loans by staying in Alaska to practice for a specified number of years. Recently, the number of WWAMI seats was increased from 10 to 20, and legislation such as SB 18 aims to raise that number. However, expanding the WWAMI program only ensures that we have more healthcare practitioners in future years, as WWAMI participants must complete their education before they can begin their service. Therefore, it is not the immediate solution that we need. SB 139 would be an effective way to fill this gap in the very near future, and would attract healthcare practitioners from all areas of country, rather than just from the WWAMI participating states.

Senate Bill 139 will provide incentives for up to 90 applicants per year in 10 different health care occupations. Thirty of the slots will be reserved for “very-hard-to-fill” positions, which can be located only in areas that are designated by the Commissioner of Health and Social Services. Priority will be given to sites that treat patients who are uninsured and who have medical assistance or Medicare coverage. The amount of monetary incentive will vary with each slot, according to location and the category of healthcare provided. Prioritized tier I slots are designated according to the relative need in the state, and will include physicians, pharmacists and dentists. A slot in this tier has incentives of up to \$35,000 per year for three years at a regular site, and up to \$47,000 per year for three years at a very-hard-to-fill site. Tier II slots are also designated according to the relative need in the state, and will include dental hygienists, registered nurses, certified nurse practitioners, physician assistants, physical therapists, clinical psychologists, and clinical social workers holding at least a master’s degree in social work. A slot in this tier has incentives of up to \$20,000 per year for three years at a regular site, and up to \$27,000 per year for three years at a very-hard-to-fill site.

It is critical that we promptly address Alaska’s healthcare shortages in order to ensure that all Alaskans have adequate access to medical care. SB 139 helps us to save and improve the lives of our constituents by allowing us to provide for those who cannot wait until tomorrow to get the care that they need today.