



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Health
Wednesday, March 19, 2025 at 9:05 a.m.

By

T. Samuel Shomaker, MD, Dean,
Lee Buenconsejo-Lum, MD, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and
Kelley Withy, MD, Professor, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health,
Hawai'i/Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Director
John A. Burns School of Medicine

And

Michael Bruno, Provost
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

SB 299 SD2 – RELATING TO LOAN REPAYMENT FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Chair Takayama, Vice Chair Keohokapu-Lee Loy, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. The John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) **strongly supports SB 299 SD2** which seeks funding for the Hawai'i Education Loan Repayment Program (HELP) which is administered by JABSOM in conjunction with the Department of Health (DOH). The funding requested in this measure is \$15,000,000 for fiscal year 2025-2026 and the same amount for fiscal year 2026-2027.

Hawai'i faces shortages of health care professionals in almost every field from physicians, nurses, and behavioral health specialists to speech pathologists to name a few. The legislature appropriated \$10 million in 2023 and an additional \$20 million in 2024 to support the HELP program which was instrumental in increasing the number of health care providers who were eligible to receive loan repayment assistance in Hawai'i, thereby directing more health care workers to the rural and medically underserved communities. This in turn has provided better access to care for many patients.

In 2023, HELP awarded loan repayment to 890 health care workers and disbursed approximately \$18 million in state funds and \$1.56 million in private funds provided by the Benioff Foundation. Approximately 1,500 applicants were waitlisted. For 2024, the waitlisted applicants will be reviewed and awards will continue to be provided to the extent funding is available. Of the providers accepted into HELP, 47% of awardees were neighbor island providers. Fourteen (14) awardees are residents/fellows training on the continent who are now committed to returning home after training.

The main criteria considered in evaluating the providers' eligibility to participate in HELP were:

- Being a Hawai'i resident with a high likelihood of remaining in Hawai'i;
- Healthcare professions with qualified educational debt who are in a practice that serves at least 30% publicly insured patients (i.e., Medicare, Medicaid, QUEST, Tricare, VA).

Prioritization was given to primary care specialties and providers, including physicians, advanced practice registered nurses, and physician assistants in Family Medicine, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, OB-Gyn, Geriatrics, Adolescent Medicine, General Practice. Additionally, behavioral health providers including psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, marriage and family therapists, behavioral analysts, certified substance abuse counselors, and mental health counselors were given prioritization. Further consideration was given to providers practicing in any specialty in rural communities of Hawai'i Island, Maui Island, Kaho'olawe Island, Lāna'i Island, Moloka'i Island, Kaua'i Island, Niihau Island, and, on O'ahu in Waimānalo, Wai'anae, Wahiawā, Hau'ula, Lā'ie, Kahuku, Hale'iwā, Waialua.

All participants in the HELP are contractually required to commit to working in Hawai'i for a minimum of two (2) years. Therefore, to be consistent with the terms and conditions of the program, we request that on Page 3, Section 2, Line 10 the number 2 be inserted as the requisite number of years an applicant must commit to working full time in Hawai'i.

Hawai'i's high cost of living, low reimbursement rates combined with the large amount of educational debt that many health care professionals are burdened with have been cited as the main reasons health care providers leave the state. Continued funding for the HELP program incentivizes health care providers to remain in Hawai'i. Without the requested finding, HELP will not be able to provide loan repayment to those already enrolled in the program, nor will it be able to support new applicants.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.