

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

HOUSE BILL

No. 1530 Session of
2003

INTRODUCED BY PETRONE, LEDERER, DeWEESE, HENNESSEY, BELARDI,
BELFANTI, LESCOVITZ, DALEY, BISHOP, GORDNER, LAUGHLIN, KOTIK,
CORRIGAN, GOODMAN, BEBKO-JONES, YUDICHAK, LEVDANSKY, CASORIO,
HARPER, TANGRETTI, BROWNE, HARHAI, PALLONE, LEACH, SAINATO,
McILHATTAN, WALKO, WATSON, GODSHALL, SOLOBAY, EACHUS,
CAPPELLI, READSHAW, GERGELY, BUNT, MARKOSEK, WATERS, RUBLEY,
MANN, HUTCHINSON, PISTELLA, HORSEY, KIRKLAND, PETRARCA,
FREEMAN, STETLER, FRANKEL, DIVEN, WHEATLEY, MELIO AND
JOSEPHS, JUNE 4, 2003

REFERRED TO COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, JUNE 4, 2003

AN ACT

1 Providing for Commonwealth support for a Mental Health and
2 Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program for
3 Commonwealth residents who graduate from institutions of
4 higher education and who apply their degrees to careers as
5 mental health and mental retardation staff members in this
6 Commonwealth.

7 The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
8 hereby enacts as follows:

9 Section 1. Short title.

10 This act shall be known and may be cited as the Mental Health
11 and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program
12 Act.

13 Section 2. Findings and declaration of purpose.

14 The General Assembly finds and declares that:

15 (1) Community-based mental health and mental retardation
16 services and supports offer lifelong supports and

opportunities for a meaningful quality of life, in fulfillment of Federal and State laws.

(2) A qualified and stable work force is the key to quality community mental health and mental retardation services.

(3) The pool of qualified staff members has diminished.

(4) The number of college students planning to enter the mental health and mental retardation profession appears to be inadequate to meet the need for staff members in this Commonwealth.

(5) Demand from industry and other opportunities attract potential staff members away from the profession.

(6) Payment of a portion of student loans for mental health and mental retardation staff members serves the important public purpose of encouraging new staff members to continue their careers in this Commonwealth.

Section 3. Definitions.

The following words and phrases when used in this act shall have the meanings given to them in this section unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

"Agency." The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.

"Qualified applicant." A person who meets all of the following criteria:

(1) Is a resident of this Commonwealth.

(2) Has successfully completed a two-year or four-year academic degree or diploma at an accredited college or university.

(3) Has been hired as a full-time staff member by a county mental health or mental retardation service agency

1 through a merit or civil service system approved by the
2 Secretary of Public Welfare or by a private provider that is
3 under contract with a county to provide mental health or
4 mental retardation services.

5 (4) Has successfully completed both county and civil
6 service probationary periods or, in the case of a contracted
7 private provider, has successfully completed the provider's
8 established probationary period.

9 (5) Performs staff duties at a county mental health or
10 mental retardation service agency or at a private provider
11 that is under contract with a county to provide mental health
12 or mental retardation services.

13 (6) Has borrowed through a loan program administered by
14 the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.

15 (7) Is in or has completed the first year of full-time
16 employment as a staff member.

17 "Staff member." A caseworker, direct support professional,
18 therapist, program coordinator or director.

19 Section 4. Mental Health and Mental Retardation Staff Member
20 Loan Forgiveness Program.

21 (a) Components.--

22 (1) A qualified applicant who is selected for the Mental
23 Health and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness
24 Program in accordance with this act shall be eligible for
25 payment by the agency of a portion of the debt incurred by
26 the applicant through an agency-administered loan program for
27 the education necessary to be a mental health or mental
28 retardation staff member in this Commonwealth.

29 (2) The agency may forgive a proportional part of the
30 applicant's loan so that the loan may be entirely forgiven

over four years of full-time staff work. No more than \$5,000 shall be forgiven in any year, and no more than \$20,000 shall be forgiven for any applicant.

(3) Payments shall be made in accordance with the procedures established by the agency.

(b) Limitation.--A loan forgiveness award shall not be made for a loan that is in default at the time of the application.

Section 5. Loan forgiveness awards.

Recipients of the loan forgiveness awards shall be those mental health and mental retardation staff members who are working in and who have received a satisfactory rating from either a county office of mental health or mental retardation service or a private provider under contract to a county. Mental health or mental retardation staff members shall be required to submit such documentation of continued eligibility as the agency may require.

Section 6. Funding.

Loan forgiveness awards may be made to the extent that funds are appropriated by the General Assembly and are sufficient to cover the administration of the program. In the event that funding is insufficient to fully fund administration and all eligible applicants, the agency shall utilize a random lottery system for determining which applicants receive loan forgiveness awards.

Section 7. Responsibility of agency.

The agency shall administer the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Staff Member Loan Forgiveness Program established by this act and to adopt such regulations, policies, procedures and forms as are necessary and not inconsistent with the provisions of this act.

1 Section 8. Effective date.

2 This act shall take effect in 60 days.