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Susan O'Neill, Chair

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Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 900 – Higher Education – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Eligibility
Education, Energy, and the Environment
February 28, 2024

The Rural Maryland Council supports Senate Bill 900 – Higher Education – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Eligibility. The purpose of this bill is to expand the eligibility for the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program to include individuals who received a certain degree from an accredited veterinary school and provided veterinary services for a certain time period at certain animal shelters.

Recruiting and retaining veterinarians in rural areas can be challenging due to factors such as limited job opportunities, lower salaries, and isolation from professional networks and support systems. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, in 2023, the average student loan debt for veterinarians was \$185,486. Due to this high expense, it is more lucrative for veterinary school graduates to work in urban/suburban areas in private and small-animal practices. Additionally, shortages of veterinarians in rural regions are a pressing issue in the United States. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, in 2019, approximately 500 counties lacked sufficient veterinary services, with most of these underserved areas located in rural regions. SB 900 can play a major role in addressing potential workforce shortages by incentivizing veterinarians to practice in rural Maryland by offering a loan repayment program.

Furthermore, Senate Bill 900 has the potential to play a critical role for future students of the recently approved University of Maryland Eastern Shore's proposal for a School of Veterinary Medicine. This will be the State's first stand-alone veterinarian program and is planned to be accredited in 2026 with as many as 100 graduate students taking classes the following year. The proposed program will offer an innovative three-year completion approach, compared to a traditional four-year program. According to Moses T. Kairo, the Dean of the School of Agricultural and Natural Sciences, the School projects a 19% projected growth in the field over the next seven years.

Overall, this bill addresses critical challenges in veterinary medicine, will support and attract veterinarians to practice in rural Maryland, and has the potential to make a meaningful impact on access to veterinary care in Maryland's rural areas. By offering loan repayment assistance, the bill can help attract and retain veterinarians in underserved communities, ultimately benefiting both practitioners and residents alike.

The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 900.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.

“A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland”