



Committee: House Health and Government Operations Committee

Bill Number: SB 696 - Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment for Nurses and Nursing Workers – Program Establishment and Funding

Hearing Date: March 24, 2022

Position: Favorable if Amendments are Adopted

The Maryland Nurses Association (MNA) would like to offer this letter of support with amendments on *Senate Bill 696 – Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment for Nurses and Nursing Workers – Program Establishment and Funding*. These amendments are necessary for MNA to support the bill:

- **Remove Board of Nursing as a funding source:** The bill creates a program with funds from licensure and certification fees if the Governor does not appropriate at least \$400,000 in fiscal 2023 through fiscal 2025. MNA is very concerned about this provision. This creates a financial burden on individuals who have limited salaries, which is very different than the Physician Loan Repayment Program; and in the case of nursing support staff, the fees would be imposed on individuals who are paid a low hourly rate.

There is funding in the fiscal 2023 budget for nurse and nurse support staff loan repayment, but there appears to be no way for those funds to be used to support the program contemplated in this bill. SB 696 is budgeted under the Department of Health, and the fiscal 2023 funds are budgeted under the Maryland Higher Education Commission. **As we have reviewed the bill, we believe that the Board of Nursing must fund \$400,000 in fiscal 2023 for this program because the funds for Loan Repayment for Nurses and Nurse Support Staff are not budgeted under the Maryland Department of Health. For this reason, MNA would have significant concerns about this bill if this issue cannot be addressed.**

- **Remove Geographic and Non-Profit/Government Agency Restrictions:** The bill language is based on the loan repayment programs that try to address shortages in specific geographic regions. This framework does not fit the nursing shortage. The entire state will have a shortage of nursing and nurse support staff for the foreseeable future.
 - ***Geographic Restrictions:*** As drafted, nurses and nurse support staff would be required to work in certain underserved areas in order to continue in the loan repayment program. This restriction would keep lower-wage staff from moving and working in areas in which they can get higher wages. In addition, the entire state, not just one geographic area, is experiencing a nursing shortage;
 - ***Non-profit/Government Agencies:*** As drafted, only nurses and nurse support staff who work for non-profit organizations or government agencies would be eligible. While we understand the value of these organizations, we would note that the nursing shortage affects essential for-profit organizations such as private primary care practices, many long-term care settings, and dialysis centers. Also, by creating this restriction, it limits the mobility of lower-wage staff to seek employment in settings where they can get higher wages.
- **Change references to “nursing workers” to “nurse support staff”:** The term “nursing worker” implies that the individual is a nurse. Maryland statute provides title protection for different categories of nurses. We believe that the term “nurse support staff” is more appropriate. “Nursing workers” could be too easily misinterpreted to mean nurses themselves.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We would be happy to work with the sponsor and Committee on moving forward a loan repayment program that supports nurses and nursing support staff. If we can provide any additional info, please contact Robyn Elliott at relliott@policypartners.net.