



**2023 SESSION
POSITION PAPER**

BILL: SB 482 – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools
COMMITTEE: House Appropriations and House Ways and Means Committees
POSITION: Letter of Support As Amended
BILL ANALYSIS: SB 482 expands purpose of the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program to include repayment assistance of loans for mental health professionals serving as school psychologists, resource psychologists, psychologist coordinators, social workers, social worker supervisors, or mental health coordinators employed by county school systems or certain local health departments and requiring an Office to publicize the program to eligible mental health professionals.

POSITION RATIONALE: The Maryland Association of County Health Officers (MACHO) is in support of SB 482 *As Amended in the Senate*. Health Officers were concerned that in some counties, particularly in rural areas where local health departments are the primary providers of behavioral healthcare for students, an unintended consequence of SB 482 as introduced, would make it more difficult for local health departments to recruit and retain licensed behavioral health staff in their own departments. Protecting the behavioral health of school-aged children requires a collaborative effort to mitigate the impact of trauma, respond to the early symptoms of mental illness, and intervene when the signs of substance use arise. To ensure every child has access to quality behavioral health services no matter where they live, MACHO had respectfully asked that local health departments also be offered the same eligibility for loan assistance repayment. The Senate approved that amendment.

As justification, MACHO stresses that schools are natural settings for partnerships, and in many jurisdictions, school-based behavioral health services are provided by employees of local health departments. Their presence in schools is critical to support early, ongoing, and sustainable intervention, and in some communities, these clinicians may be the only accessible source of care. Additionally, the integration of non-school clinicians into school-based services supports continuity of care by also providing access to care during holidays, extended breaks, and summer recess.

Like many sectors of healthcare, there are workforce shortages across all levels of behavioral health licensure. Recruiting well-educated and well-trained staff to provide critical services in a public setting has become increasingly difficult when faced with the lure of private sector or federal agencies salaries or workloads. For workforce shortage areas, such as rural communities or low-income neighborhoods, unfilled vacancies mean a reduction in services, delays in care and ultimately and most importantly, is a disservice to our children.

Programs such as the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program are commendable and support opportunity and incentivize public service. However, these programs should not put partner agencies at a competitive disadvantage as they work to serve the same communities.

The amended bill would expand access to the program, improve the ability of underserved communities to recruit, develop and retain staff, and achieve the goal of ensuring an effective workforce to serve at-risk children in our schools and in our local health departments. For these reasons, the Maryland Association of County Health Officers submits this letter of support AS Amended for SB 482. For more information, please contact Ruth Maiorana, MACHO Executive Director at rmaiora1@jhu.edu or 410-937-1433.