

Chair of the Senate Committee

SENATE BILL 334

February 14, 2024 – 1PM

OPPOSED (UNF)

Kirsten Heavener

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I am testifying in opposition to SB 334.

I was a recipient of the Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment Program (LARP) from 2016-2018 while I worked full-time at Dr. Diane D. Romaine and Associates in Frostburg, MD. I continue to participate in the Maryland Healthy Smiles program as a full-time Merit position Dentist at the Allegany County Health Department in Cumberland, MD. The program was an immense help for a new dentist who had recently graduated from University of Maryland Dental School (May 2014) and completed a 1-year GPR in York, PA (2014-2015) - and now had loans to start paying.

I chose to work in a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA), though this choice was not an easy one. When I made the decision to move to Western Maryland, I was newly married and my husband had a job at a prominent Baltimore law firm. There were 2 factors that heavily influenced my decision.

- 1- I'm originally from Western Maryland and was excited to move back to help in my hometown community (which is classified as an HPSA).
- 2- My employer expressed to me that I would have the opportunity to apply and possibly be awarded with the LARP program. This was a huge incentive knowing that I would need to start paying on my student loans from dental school.

In my dental school class alone, there were six students from Western Maryland. Three of those classmates have not returned home to work. Of the other three, one returned home for 1 year following graduation but then moved on to Pittsburgh. The two of us who remain represent only one-third of what the potential work force could have become in the area from among the Class of 2014 Western Maryland residents. Of the remaining approximately 120 members of my class (not from my area) none of them moved to Western Maryland. We need incentives to draw

people to work in an HPSA. Being a local of the area clearly isn't enough. And if you're not a native, then living in an HPSA can be a hard-sell.

The incentive that helped sway my decision was that I could help a community that was in need while also being rewarded for my work. Though the funds were an immense help (I ended up receiving approximately \$70,000 over the 3 years), an increase in the funding would absolutely be beneficial to young dentists that are trying to help out in shortage areas. I'm about to celebrate 10 years since my graduation and I still have over \$100,000 in dental school debt (and that's with in-state tuition). Without the MDC-LARP, I would owe almost double what I currently owe.

I made that choice to invest in an HPSA – fulltime. Working fulltime in this community allowed me to put down roots and determine that I want to continue to give back to this area long after my LARP awarded ended. I would assume someone working part-time may not feel that same sense of community. If someone is willing to devote themselves to a HPSA fulltime, I feel that is a decision worth rewarding.

I'm so very grateful for the program and cannot state enough the good that it does for dentists, as well as for Health Professional Shortage Areas. The only language that needs modifying in the current guidelines would be the award's fiscal amount.

I oppose the proposed changes of allowing part-time dentists to be eligible for the Dent-Care Program. I also believe that the funding should be increased for those eligible by the traditional Dent-Care Program guidelines.

Dr. Kirsten Heavener, DDS, FAGD