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*Susan O'Neill, Chair*

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Testimony in Support of  
House Bill 1398 – Higher Education – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program - Eligibility  
Appropriations Committee  
February 28, 2024

**The Rural Maryland Council supports House Bill 1398 – 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. HB 1398 can play a major role in addressing potential workforce shortages by incentivizing veterinarians to practice in Maryland by offering a loan repayment program.

Furthermore, House Bill 1398 will play a critical role for future students of the recently approved University of Maryland Eastern Shore's proposal for a School of Veterinary. This will be the State's first stand-alone veterinarian program and students are anticipated to be accepted as early fall 2026. 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, House Bill 1398 addresses critical challenges in veterinary medicine, will support students attending the future School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, 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 House Bill 1398.

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”*