


Background

Primary care providers (PCPs) are essential to high-quality, cost-effective health care. They work to keep patients healthy and diagnose and control acute and chronic illnesses. Primary care disciplines are family medicine, general internal medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, psychiatry, and obstetrics and gynecology, plus general dentistry and behavioral health. But providers are scarce as we are experiencing a national shortage of PCPs and competition for those employees is extremely high. Recently, large health systems have begun significantly increasing salaries and offering loan repayment assistance. Community Health Centers  and other safety net facilities are struggling to stay competitive in that environment.

The Primary Health Care Practitioner (PHCP) line item in the Department of Health (DOH) supports several worthwhile programs that help to recruit and retain clinicians in Pennsylvania. However, this line item is proposed to be transferred from DOH to the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), with a reduction up to 2 percent. Two successful programs within this line item will be affected: The Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program (LRP) and Pennsylvania Primary Care Career Center.

The Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program (LRP) is an essential tool in recruiting and retaining primary care providers. The annual funding of \$2 million enables the Department of Health to fund loan repayment for approximately 40 primary care providers and DOH has been effectively administering grants to providers in a way that meets the needs of communities, reduces the clinician shortage and benefits clinicians with student debt. The Pennsylvania Primary Care Career Center has utilized its network and resources to place 39 primary care clinicians and executive staff in underserved communities in the last three years. The placements have been in Community Health Centers and other safety net organizations across the state.

Facts

- The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) has found that an FQHC physician will average 3,300 patient visits per year while dentists, nurse practitioners and physician assistants will average around 2,700 patients visits per year, which reflects a high return on investment for increasing access to care.
- DOH's knowledge and experience with public health needs places its staff in a unique position to leverage programs within the Primary Health Care Practitioner line item, unlike PHEAA.
- DOH has demonstrated consistent and increasing gains through the successful programs under the PHCP line item and the positive trends and outcomes are projected to grow if they are able to continue administering the program as a public health initiative.

The Primary Health Care Practitioner line item should be level funded and remain within the Department of Health, or proposed Health & Human Services; it should **NOT** be transferred to PHEAA. The Loan Repayment Program itself merits exploration of a funding increase in future state budgets.

Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers (PACHC) is a statewide membership services organization representing Community Health Centers, the largest primary care network in Pennsylvania.

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