Cosponsor and Pass H.R. 7761, the Protecting Access to Loan Forgiveness for Public Servants During the COVID-19 Pandemic Act

The coronavirus relief package Congress enacted in March suspended federal Direct student loan payments through Sept. 30. This has since been extended by Executive Order through the end of the year. During this time, all suspended payments must count as qualifying payments for borrowers in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program, provided they remain in full-time public service. However, many workers in the public sector—including psychologists—are experiencing disruptions in their employment, making them ineligible for these benefits.

The bipartisan Protecting Access to Loan Forgiveness for Public Servants During the COVID-19 Pandemic Act (H.R. 7761), introduced by Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.) and Rep. David Joyce (R-Ohio), would ensure that for any borrower enrolled in PSLF, and employed in full-time public service before the declared national emergency related to COVID-19, student loan payments that are suspended as a result of the pandemic are counted towards PSLF eligibility, even if the borrower’s employment is disrupted due to the coronavirus.

Psychologists are needed in public service

Data show that the need for licensed mental and behavioral health professionals remains great across the United States, with every state having documented mental health professions shortage areas. This demand is only expected to increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, there has been a steady paring back of federal supports for students pursuing graduate education, while demand for careers requiring a doctorate or professional degree continues to grow at the fastest rate. Most states require an advanced degree upon entry into the mental health fields.

- Nearly 50% of PhD-level psychologists rely on loans or their own funds to pay for graduate school, which takes on average 5-6 years to complete. Health service psychologists graduate with an average debt load between $95,000 and $138,500.
- Psychologists and other highly-trained mental health providers are needed to fill our nation’s critical mental health workforce shortages. HRSA projects a national shortage of 14,300 psychologists by 2030 to address unmet behavioral health needs.
- The need for psychologists is expected to grow faster than average from 2018-2028, with increased demand for services in schools, hospitals, mental health centers, and social service agencies.
THE PUBLIC SERVICE LOAN FORGIVENESS PROGRAM
The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program supports graduates who commit themselves to a career in public service by forgiving remaining federal student loan balances after 10 years of on-time repayment. PSLF is a tool for recruiting skilled individuals to work in high-need communities—providing public safety, health, education, and social services—and to serve on the frontlines of COVID-19. Rural populations are especially in need of mental health providers, including psychologists. The program ensures that recent graduates can pursue higher education, including advanced degrees, and choose a career path that puts service to the public ahead of other factors.

CONGRESS MUST ENSURE CONTINUED ELIGIBILITY DURING COVID-19
Since the onset of the coronavirus, millions of workers have filed for unemployment benefits. Even among those who have not been laid off, many are still being furloughed or seeing their hours reduced. This includes those in the healthcare workforce, among which are professionals providing critical mental and behavioral health care. Many are in public service and enrolled in PSLF. Although the current emergency period of loan suspension was intended to count towards PSLF eligibility, public service workers whose employment was impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are being inadvertently penalized through no fault of their own.

By passing the bipartisan Protecting Access to Loan Forgiveness for Public Servants During the COVID-19 Pandemic Act (H.R. 7761), Congress can make certain that such unintended consequences are mitigated, and ensure that borrowers whose employment was impacted as a result of COVID-19 are still able to receive full emergency benefits related to PSLF.

5. Ibid.
6. HRSA data.
7. Ibid.
8. Rural Health Information Hub; Rural Mental Health
10. Rural Health Information Hub; Rural Mental Health