

113TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 2425

To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to reduce the shortage of psychiatrists in the Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs by repaying loans for certain psychiatrists, to carry out a pilot program to provide housing allowances to health care providers of the Veterans Health Administration who accept assignment at rural and highly rural clinics, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JUNE 4, 2014

Mr. BEGICH (for himself and Mr. PRYOR) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to reduce the shortage of psychiatrists in the Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs by repaying loans for certain psychiatrists, to carry out a pilot program to provide housing allowances to health care providers of the Veterans Health Administration who accept assignment at rural and highly rural clinics, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 This Act may be cited as the “Ensuring Veterans’
3 Resiliency Act”.

4 **SEC. 2. PILOT PROGRAM ON REPAYMENT OF EDUCATIONAL**
5 **LOANS FOR CERTAIN PSYCHIATRISTS OF**
6 **VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION.**

7 (a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs
8 shall carry out a pilot program to repay loans of individ-
9 uals described in subsection (b) that—

10 (1) were used by such individuals to finance the
11 educational expenses of such individuals relating to
12 psychiatric medicine, including education leading
13 to—

14 (A) an undergraduate degree;

15 (B) a degree of doctor of medicine; or

16 (C) a degree of doctor of osteopathy; and

17 (2) were obtained from any of the following:

18 (A) A governmental entity.

19 (B) A private financial institution.

20 (C) An institution of higher education.

21 (D) Any other entity as specified the Sec-
22 retary for purposes of the pilot program.

23 (b) ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS.—

24 (1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), an
25 individual eligible for participation in the pilot pro-
26 gram is an individual who—

1 (A) either—

2 (i) is licensed or eligible for licensure
3 to practice psychiatric medicine in the Vet-
4 erans Health Administration of the De-
5 partment of Veterans Affairs; or

6 (ii) is enrolled in the final year of a
7 residency program leading to a specialty
8 qualification in psychiatric medicine that is
9 approved by the Accreditation Council for
10 Graduate Medical Education; and

11 (B) demonstrates a commitment to a long-
12 term career as a psychiatrist in the Veterans
13 Health Administration, as determined by the
14 Secretary.

15 (2) PROHIBITION ON SIMULTANEOUS ELIGI-
16 BILITY.—An individual who is participating in any
17 other program of the Federal Government that re-
18 pays the educational loans of the individual is not el-
19 igible to participate in the pilot program.

20 (c) SELECTION.—

21 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall select
22 not less than 10 individuals described in subsection
23 (b) to participate in the pilot program for each year
24 in which the Secretary carries out the pilot program.

1 (2) RURAL OR HIGHLY RURAL AREAS.—Of the
2 individuals selected under paragraph (1), not less
3 than five shall be individuals who practice psy-
4 chiatric medicine in a rural area or highly rural area
5 or demonstrate a commitment to practice psychiatric
6 medicine in such an area.

7 (d) PERIOD OF OBLIGATED SERVICE.—The Sec-
8 retary shall enter into an agreement with each individual
9 selected under subsection (c) in which such individual
10 agrees to serve a period of obligated service for the Vet-
11 erans Health Administration in the field of psychiatric
12 medicine, as determined by the Secretary for purposes of
13 the pilot program, in exchange for the repayment of the
14 loan or loans of such individual under the pilot program.

15 (e) LOAN REPAYMENTS.—

16 (1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), a
17 loan repayment under this section may consist of
18 payment of the principal, interest, and related ex-
19 penses of a loan obtained by an individual who is
20 participating in the pilot program for all educational
21 expenses (including tuition, fees, books, and labora-
22 tory expenses) of such individual relating to edu-
23 cation described in subsection (a)(1).

24 (2) LIMIT.—The amount paid by the Secretary
25 under the pilot program for each year of obligated

1 service agreed to by an individual under subsection
2 (d) may not exceed \$60,000.

3 (f) BREACH.—

4 (1) LIABILITY.—An individual who participates
5 in the pilot program and fails to satisfy the period
6 of obligated service under subsection (d) shall be lia-
7 ble to the United States, in lieu of such obligated
8 service, for the amount that has been paid to or on
9 behalf of the individual under the pilot program, re-
10 duced by the proportion that the number of days
11 served for completion of the period of obligated serv-
12 ice bears to the total number of days in the period
13 of obligated service of such individual.

14 (2) REPAYMENT PERIOD.—Any amount of dam-
15 ages that the United States is entitled to recover
16 under this subsection shall be paid to the United
17 States not later than one year after the date of the
18 breach of the agreement.

19 (g) REPORT.—

20 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 90 days after
21 the date on which the pilot program terminates
22 under subsection (i), the Secretary shall submit to
23 the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate
24 and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the

1 House of Representatives a report on the pilot pro-
2 gram.

3 (2) ELEMENTS.—The report required by para-
4 graph (1) shall include the following:

5 (A) An assessment of the overall effect of
6 the pilot program on the psychiatric workforce
7 shortage of the Veterans Health Administra-
8 tion.

9 (B) A current assessment of the long-term
10 stability of the psychiatric workforce of the Vet-
11 erans Health Administration.

12 (C) Strategies of the Veterans Health Ad-
13 ministration to improve and increase the ability
14 of the Administration to promote the physical
15 and mental resiliency of all veterans.

16 (h) REGULATIONS.—The Secretary shall prescribe
17 regulations to carry out this section, including standards
18 for qualified loans and authorized payees and other terms
19 and conditions for the making of loan repayments.

20 (i) TERMINATION.—The authority to carry out the
21 pilot program shall expire on the date that is three years
22 after the date on which the Secretary commences the pilot
23 program.

1 **SEC. 3. COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES**
2 **STUDY ON PAY DISPARITIES OF PSYCHIA-**
3 **TRISTS OF VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRA-**
4 **TION.**

5 (a) STUDY.—

6 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
7 after the date of the enactment of this Act, the
8 Comptroller General of the United States shall con-
9 duct a study of pay disparities among psychiatrists
10 of the Veterans Health Administration of the De-
11 partment of Veterans Affairs.

12 (2) ELEMENTS.—The study conducted under
13 paragraph (1) shall include—

14 (A) an examination of laws, regulations,
15 practices, and policies, including salary flexibili-
16 ties, that contribute to pay disparities described
17 in paragraph (1); and

18 (B) recommendations with respect to legis-
19 lative or administrative actions to improve eq-
20 uity in pay among psychiatrists of the Veterans
21 Health Administration.

22 (b) REPORT.—Not later than one year after the date
23 on which the Comptroller General completes the study
24 under subsection (a), the Comptroller General shall sub-
25 mit to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the Senate

1 and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the House of
 2 Representatives a report on the results of the study.

3 **SEC. 4. PILOT PROGRAM ON HOUSING ALLOWANCES FOR**
 4 **HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS OF VETERANS**
 5 **HEALTH ADMINISTRATION ACCEPTING AS-**
 6 **SIGNMENT AT RURAL AND HIGHLY RURAL**
 7 **COMMUNITY-BASED OUTPATIENT CLINICS.**

8 (a) PILOT PROGRAM AUTHORIZED.—The Secretary
 9 of Veterans Affairs may carry out a pilot program to as-
 10 sess the feasibility and advisability of providing a housing
 11 allowance to health care providers of the Veterans Health
 12 Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs who
 13 accept assignment at rural or highly rural community-
 14 based outpatient clinics as a means of encouraging such
 15 health care providers to accept assignment to such clinics.

16 (b) ELIGIBILITY.—An individual is eligible for par-
 17 ticipation in the pilot program if the individual—

18 (1) is a health care provider;

19 (2) is, or agrees to become, an employee of the
 20 Veterans Health Administration on a full-time basis
 21 in a health care position designated by the Secretary
 22 for purposes of the pilot program; and

23 (3) accepts an assignment in such position for
 24 a term of not less than 36 months at a rural or
 25 highly rural community-based outpatient clinic se-

1 lected by the Secretary for purposes of the pilot pro-
 2 gram.

3 (c) CONDITIONS ON PAYMENT OF HOUSING ALLOW-
 4 ANCE.—Except as provided in subsection (d)(3), an indi-
 5 vidual may be provided a housing allowance under the
 6 pilot program only while—

7 (1) in good standing as a health care provider
 8 within the Veterans Health Administration; and

9 (2) assigned as a health care provider at a rural
 10 or highly rural community-based outpatient clinic.

11 (d) AMOUNT OF HOUSING ALLOWANCE.—

12 (1) MONTHLY AMOUNT DURING INITIAL
 13 TERM.—During the first 36 months of participation
 14 in the pilot program, the housing allowance provided
 15 a health care provider participating in the pilot pro-
 16 gram shall be provided on a monthly basis at a rate
 17 that is equivalent to the monthly rate of basic allow-
 18 ance for housing (BAH) payable under section 403
 19 of title 37, United States Code, to members of the
 20 uniformed services whose grade, dependency status,
 21 and geographic location most closely equals, as de-
 22 termined by the Secretary, the grade of such pro-
 23 vider under section 7404 of title 38, United States
 24 Code, and the dependency status and geographic lo-
 25 cation of such provider.

1 (2) MONTHLY AMOUNT FOR CERTAIN PRO-
2 VIDERS FOR ADDITIONAL TERM.—If upon comple-
3 tion of the first 36 months in the pilot program a
4 health care provider accepts continuing participation
5 in the pilot program at a rural or highly rural com-
6 munity-based outpatient clinic for a term of not less
7 than 12 additional months, the housing allowance
8 provided the health care provider under the pilot
9 program shall be provided on a monthly basis for
10 such additional months at a rate determined in ac-
11 cordance with paragraph (1).

12 (3) BONUS AMOUNT.—

13 (A) COMPLETION OF INITIAL TERM.—Any
14 health care provider who successfully completes
15 36 months of participation in the pilot program
16 shall be paid upon completion of participation
17 in the pilot program an amount equal to three
18 months of the monthly rate of housing allow-
19 ance provided the health care provider under
20 paragraph (1) during the last month before the
21 provider's completion of participation in the
22 pilot program.

23 (B) COMPLETION OF ADDITIONAL ONE-
24 YEAR TERM.—Any health care provider who
25 successfully completes 48 months of participa-

tion in the pilot program shall be paid upon completion of participation in the pilot program an amount equal to 12 months of the monthly rate of housing allowance provided the health care provider under paragraph (2) during the last month before the provider's completion of participation in the pilot program.

(C) COMPLETION OF ADDITIONAL TWO-YEAR TERM.—Any health care provider who successfully completes 60 months of participation in the pilot program shall be paid upon completion of participation in the pilot program an amount equal to 13 months of the monthly rate of housing allowance provided the health care provider under paragraph (2) during the last month before the provider's completion of participation in the pilot program.

(D) NO REQUIREMENT TO REMAIN ON ASSIGNMENT.—An amount payable under this paragraph shall be paid whether or not the health care provider concerned remains in an assignment at a rural or highly rural community-based outpatient clinic.

(e) SUPPLEMENTAL NATURE OF ALLOWANCE.—Any housing allowance provided under the pilot program shall

1 be in addition to any pay (including basic pay, special pay,
2 and retirement or other bonus pay) payable to personnel
3 of the Veterans Health Administration personnel under
4 chapter 74 of title 38, United States Code, or any other
5 provision of law.

6 (f) ANNUAL REPORTS.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
8 after the date of the enactment of this Act and not
9 less frequently than once each year thereafter while
10 the pilot program is in effect, the Secretary shall
11 submit to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the
12 Senate and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of
13 the House of Representatives a report on the pilot
14 program.

15 (2) ELEMENTS.—Each report submitted under
16 paragraph (1) shall include the following:

17 (A) A current description of the pilot pro-
18 gram, including the current number of partici-
19 pants in the pilot program and the amounts of
20 housing allowance being provided such partici-
21 pants.

22 (B) A current assessment of the value of
23 the housing allowance under the pilot program
24 in encouraging health care providers in accept-

1 ing assignment to rural and highly rural com-
2 munity-based outpatient clinics.

3 (g) FUNDING.—Amounts for housing allowances
4 under the pilot program shall be derived from amounts
5 available for the Veterans Health Administration for Med-
6 ical Services.

7 (h) SUNSET.—

8 (1) IN GENERAL.—No individual may com-
9 mence participation in the pilot program on or after
10 the date that is five years after the date of the en-
11 actment of this Act.

12 (2) CONTINUATION OF ON-GOING PROVISION OF
13 ALLOWANCE.—Nothing in paragraph (1) shall be
14 construed to prohibit the Secretary from providing
15 housing allowances under the pilot program to indi-
16 viduals who commence participation in the pilot pro-
17 gram before the date that is five years after the date
18 of the enactment of this Act.

19 (i) RURAL OR HIGHLY RURAL COMMUNITY-BASED
20 OUTPATIENT CLINIC DEFINED.—In this section, the term
21 “rural or highly rural community-based outpatient clinic”
22 means a community-based outpatient clinic of the Vet-
23 erans Health Administration that predominantly serves
24 veterans who live in rural areas and highly rural areas.

1 **SEC. 5. DEFINITIONS.**

2 In this Act:

3 (1) **HIGHLY RURAL AREA.**—The term “highly
4 rural area” means an area located in a county or
5 similar community that has less than seven individ-
6 uals residing in that county or community per
7 square mile.

8 (2) **RURAL AREA.**—The term “rural area”
9 means an area that is not an urbanized area or a
10 highly rural area.

11 (3) **URBANIZED AREA.**—The term “urbanized
12 area” has the meaning given that term by the Direc-
13 tor of the Bureau of the Census.

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