Cosponsor and Pass H.R. 6720, the Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act

The Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act (H.R. 6720), introduced by Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), would forgive the student loan debt of frontline health workers, including psychologists, providing care for those impacted by COVID-19 or conducting research related to the pandemic. This loan forgiveness would apply to all federal and private student loans and the bill ensures that any canceled debt is not considered taxable income. Both paid and volunteer workers, including current trainees, who served for any period during the qualifying emergency related to COVID-19, would be eligible.

EVIDENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Even before the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the nation was already facing a mental health crisis, with demand for psychologists projected to grow over the next decade. Depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and suicide were among the highest behavioral health concerns people face. Experts believe that COVID-19 will only exacerbate these issues, likely adding post-traumatic stress disorder to this growing list of issues. Data show that Americans are already experiencing a surge in COVID-related mental and behavioral health problems. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that close to half of the population reports that the coronavirus crisis is harming their mental health. Furthermore, new studies are highlighting the significant psychological impacts of being in quarantine.

PSYCHOLOGISTS ARE FRONTLINE WORKERS

APA’s recently adopted resolution underscores the role of psychology in the battle against COVID-19. Many mental and behavioral health professionals are currently on the frontlines of the pandemic, providing much-needed care to individuals struggling to cope with the mental health impacts of the coronavirus—including the loss of a loved one, a financial hardship, or adapting to social distancing—as well as conducting critically needed behavioral research. These professionals are sacrificing the ability to see their families, their own safety, and in some cases, even their own mental well-being, as evidenced by the reporting on the mental health burdens being carried by frontline workers.

Psychologists care deeply about their patients, and work to deliver the best care possible, irrespective of pay or other forms of compensation. However, it cannot be ignored that earning a doctoral degree in psychology requires significant economic investment, including incurring a substantial debt burden over a period of many years. This requires commitment and perseverance, which are the exact qualities that psychologists—including many who are new to the profession—are bringing to the fore as they go to the frontlines of this pandemic.

CONGRESS MUST ACT

As Congress thinks through innovative ways to recognize health care workers for their ongoing commitment to their patients during this time, including furnishing them with hazard pay, enacting legislation such as the bipartisan Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act provides economic security when many need it most.


