

A First Look at the VA MISSION Act Veteran Health Administration Medical School Scholarship and Loan Repayment Programs

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Background: The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is challenged by physician staffing shortages. The 2018 VA MISSION ACT authorized 2 scholarship and loan repayment programs. The Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) created scholarships for physicians and dentists. The Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP) increased the maximum debt reduction. The Specialty Education Loan Repayment Program (SELRP) authorized the repayment of educational loans for physicians in specialties deemed necessary for VA. The Veterans Healing Veterans (VHV) program was a 1-year pilot program specifically for veteran medical students.

Observations: For academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, HPSP offered 54 scholarships with 51 accepted. In 2020, the VHV program offered 22 scholarships with

12 accepted by recipients at all 5 Teague-Cranston medical schools and 4 Historically Black Colleges and Universities. For SELRP, 14 applicants have been approved in family medicine, internal medicine, emergency medicine, and geriatrics. The average loan repayment is anticipated to be \$110,000, which equates to 38.5 VA service years for the 14 applicants. Since 2018, 1546 physicians received EDRP awards with amounts increased from an average of \$96,090 in 2018 to \$148,302 in 2020.

Conclusions: The VA MISSION Act's scholarship and loan repayment programs provide VA with several ways to address physician workforce shortages. Ultimately, the success of the program will be determined by the recruitment of scholarship recipients to VA careers.

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Fed Pract. 2022;39(3).
Published March 15.
doi:10.12788/fp.0238

As one of 4 statutory missions, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) educates and trains health professionals to enhance the quality of and timely access to care provided to veterans within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). To achieve its mission to educate, the VA has conducted health professions education and training in partnership with affiliated US academic institutions for the past 76 years in accordance with the landmark 1946 Policy Memorandum No. 2.^{1,2}

Despite its long-term success affiliating with medical schools, VA has continued to be challenged by physician staff shortages with wide variability in the number and specialty of available health care professionals across facilities.^{3,4} A 2020 VA Office of Inspector General report on VHA occupational staffing shortages concluded that numerous physician specialties were difficult to recruit due to a lack of qualified applicants, noncompetitive salary, and less desirable geographic locations.³

Federal health professions scholarship programs and loan repayment programs have long been used to address physician shortages.⁴ Focusing on phy-

sician shortages in underserved areas in the US, the Emergency Health Personnel Act of 1970 and its subsequent amendments paved the way for various federal medical school scholarship and loan repayment programs.⁵ Similarly, physician shortages in the armed forces were mitigated through the Uniformed Services Health Professions Revitalization Act of 1972 (USHPRA).^{6,7}

In 2018, Congress passed the VA MISSION (Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks) Act, which included sections designed to alleviate physician shortages in the VHA.⁸ These sections authorized scholarships similar to those offered by the US Department of Defense (DoD) and loan repayment programs. Section 301 created the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP), which offers scholarships for physicians and dentists. Section 302 increased the maximum debt reduction through the Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP). Section 303 authorizes the Specialty Education Loan Repayment Program (SELRP), which provides for repayment of educational loans for

TABLE 1 Comparison of VA and DoD Scholarship Programs

Program Offerings	VA HPSP	VA Veterans Healing Veterans	DoD HPSP
Eligibility	Matriculating to accredited US medical or dental schools	Veterans matriculated in 2020 at selected medical schools	Matriculating to accredited US medical or dental schools meeting DoD physical standards
Tuition and fees	100%	100%	100%
Monthly stipend	\$1142	\$1142	\$2330
Service obligation	18 mo service obligation for every 1 y scholarship support	48 mo service obligation for 4 y scholarship support	12 mo service obligation for every 1 y scholarship support
Laptop	Not included	Not Included	\$700 annually
Paid external rotations	No	Yes, 4	Yes
Payback location	Selected by student from VA-produced list	Selected by student from VA-produced list	Determined by DoD
Scholarship award	1 - 4 y	4 y	3 - 4 y

Abbreviations: DoD, US Department of Defense; HPSP, Health Professions Scholarship Program; VA, US Department of Veterans Affairs.

physicians in specialties deemed necessary for VA. Finally, Section 304 created the Veterans Healing Veterans (VHV), a pilot scholarship specifically for veteran medical students.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Health Professions Scholarship

The VA HPSP is a program for physicians and dentists that extends from 2020 to 2033. The HPSP funds the costs of tuition, fees, and provides a stipend with a service obligation of 18 months for each year of support. The program is authorized for 10 years and must provide a minimum of 50 scholarships annually for physicians or dentists based on VHA needs. Applications are screened based on criteria that include a commitment to rural or underserved populations, veteran status, grade point average, essays, and letters of recommendation. Although the minimum required number of scholarships annually is 50, VA anticipates providing 1000 scholarships over 10 years with an aim to significantly increase the number physicians at VHA facilities (Table 1).

Veterans Healing Veterans

Implemented in 2020, the VHV was a 1-year pilot program. It offered scholarships to 2 veterans attending medical school at each of the 5 Teague-Cranston and the 4 Historically Black College and

University (HBCU) medical schools (Table 2). The intent of the program was to determine the feasibility of increasing the pool of veteran physicians at VHA. Eligible applicants were notified of the scholarship opportunity through the American Medical College Application Service or through the medical school. Applicants must have separated from military service within the preceding 10 years of being admitted to medical school. In exchange for full tuition, fees, a monthly stipend, and rotation travel costs, the recipients accepted a 4-year clinical service obligation at VA facilities after completing their residency training.

Specialty Education Loan Repayment

The SELRP is a loan repayment program available to recently graduated physicians. Applicants must have graduated from an accredited medical or osteopathic school, matched to an accredited residency program and be ≥ 2 years from completion of residency. The specialties qualifying for SELRP are determined through an analysis of succession planning by the VA Office of Workforce Management and Consulting and change based on VA physician workforce needs. The SELRP provides loan repayment in the amount of \$40,000 per year for up to 4 years, with a service obligation of 1 year for each \$40,000 of support. In April 2021, VA

TABLE 2 Prioritized Medical Schools

Teague-Cranston Medical Schools	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
Boonshoft School of Medicine, Wright State University	Drew University of Medicine and Science
Edwards School of Medicine, Marshall University	Howard University of Medicine
Quillen College of Medicine, East Tennessee State University	Meharry Medical College
Texas A&M College of Medicine	Morehouse School of Medicine
University of South Carolina School of Medicine	

TABLE 3 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 Program Results and Demographics

Criteria	Health Professions Scholarship, No.	Veterans Healing Veterans, No.
Applicants screened	126	28
Scholarships offered (accepted)	54 (51)	22 (12)
Veterans	7	12
Women	26	1
Historically Black Colleges and Universities	6	4

began accepting applications from the eligible specialties of family medicine, internal medicine, gastroenterology, psychiatry, emergency medicine, and geriatrics.

Education Debt Reduction

The EDRP offers debt relief to clinicians in the most difficult to recruit professions, including physicians (generalists and specialists), registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, social workers, and psychologists. The list of difficult to recruit positions is developed annually by VA facilities. Annual reimbursements through the program may be used for tuition and expenses, such as fees, books, supplies, equipment, and other materials. In 2018, through the MISSION Act Section 302, the annual loan repayment was increased from \$24,000 to \$40,000, and the maximum level of support was increased from \$120,000 to \$200,000 over 5 years. Recipients receive reimbursement for loan repayment at the end of each year or service period and recipients are not required to remain in VA for 5 years.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Health Professions Scholarship

For academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, 126 HPSP applications from both allopathic and osteopathic schools were submitted and 51 scholarships were awarded (Table 3). Assuming an average residency length of 4 years,

VHA estimates that these awards will yield 204 service-year equivalents by 2029.

Veterans Healing Veterans

In the VHV program, scholarship recipients came from 5 Teague-Cranston schools; 2 at University of South Carolina, 2 at East Tennessee State University, 2 at Wright State University, 1 at Texas A&M College of Medicine, 1 at Marshall University; and 3 HBCUs; 2 at Howard University, 1 at Morehouse School of Medicine and 1 at Meharry Medical College. The Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science did not nominate any students for the scholarship. Assuming all recipients complete postgraduate training, the VHV scholarship program will provide an additional 12 veteran physicians to serve at VA for at least 4 years each (48 service years).

Specialty Education Loan Repayment

Fourteen applicants have been approved, including 5 in psychiatry, 4 in family medicine, 3 in internal medicine, 1 in emergency medicine, and 1 in geriatrics. The mean loan repayment is anticipated to be \$110,000 and equating to 38.5 VA service years or a mean of 2.3 years of service obligation per individual for the first cohort. The program has no termination date, and with continued funding, VA anticipates granting 100 loan repayments annually.

Education Debt Reduction

Since 2018, 1,546 VA physicians have received EDRP awards. Due to the increased reimbursement provided through the MISSION Act, average physician award amounts have increased from \$96,090 in 2018 to \$142,557 in 2019 and \$148,302 in 2020.

CONCLUSIONS

The VA physician scholarship and loan repayment programs outlined in the MISSION Act build on the success of existing federal scholarship programs by providing opportunities for physician trainees to alleviate educational debt and explore a VA health professions career.

Looking ahead, VA must focus on measuring the success of the MISSION scholarship and loan repayment programs by tracking rates of acceptance and student graduation, residency and fellowship completion, and placement in VA medical facilities—both for the service obligation and future employment. Ultimately, the total impact on VA staffing, especially at rural and underresourced sites, will determine the success of the MISSION programs.

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Author disclosures

The authors report no actual or potential conflicts of interest or outside sources of funding with regard to this article.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

Ethics and consent

Not applicable.

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