



TEXAS COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

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Submitted by Jan Friese, Executive Director, jan@txca.org; 512-472-3403 ext. 11

The Texas Counseling Association represents more than 6,500 professional counselors working in an array of settings across Texas. We appreciate the opportunity to provide recommendations to the Article III Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee.

1. Increase funding for the [Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals](#). The purpose of the Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals is to encourage qualified mental health professionals to practice in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area (MHPSA) and provide mental health care services to recipients under the medical assistance program authorized by the Texas Human Resources Code, Chapter 32, and to enrollees under the child health plan program authorized by the Texas Health and Safety Code, Chapter 62.

Data from the Coordinating Board shows that about 230 mental health professionals in Texas are currently participating in this program. At current funding levels of \$2.7 million for the biennium coupled with a \$750,000 annual federal match, the Coordinating Board is only able to provide loan repayment assistance to recipients already enrolled in the program. They have not been able to add new recipients for some time.

Texas ranks second in the nation for the highest number of Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. Continuing and expanding this program is one way to strengthen the mental health workforce in Texas and encourage mental health professionals to work in shortage areas and correctional facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for access to mental health services. We encourage you to prioritize funding of this important program.

2. Appropriate \$1 million to establish a **Loan Repayment Program for School Counselors** working in Title 1 schools or in communities designated as Mental Health Workforce Shortage Areas. Legislation for such a program was incorporated into SB 11, although it was removed in conference committee. Loan repayment assistance for teachers and other mental health professionals has proven to be an effective strategy to attract and retain essential professionals in those communities that need them most. Research documents that on campuses with school counselors who implement comprehensive school counseling programs, students and teachers report they feel safer, disciplinary referrals drop, grades improve, graduation rates rise and students are more likely to pursue postsecondary opportunities. Modeled after the Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals, a school counselor loan repayment program will help ensure that children in communities with the least resources would benefit from have a school counselor available to help them.

3. Reinstate funding for the **School Counselor Grant Program** set forth in Section 33.002 of the Texas Education Code. This program was housed at the Texas Education Agency to provide matching state funds to help school districts hire additional elementary school counselors.

Although TEA reports the average student to school counselor ratio in Texas is 469:1, in actuality, the student to school counselor ratios is much, much higher in many school districts, especially those in mental health workforce shortage areas and those that receive Title I allocations.

Research documents that when young students who have experienced trauma, disaster, abuse or other Adverse Childhood Experiences receive services, their ability to recover and become successful is greatly enhanced. In addition, on campuses with school counselors who implement comprehensive school counseling programs, students and teachers report they feel safer, disciplinary referrals drop, grades improve, graduation rates rise and students are more likely to pursue postsecondary opportunities. Dedicating funds specifically for this program will ensure that districts will use state dollars to hire school counselors, rather than redirecting those funds to other less effective initiatives.