



HEALTHY MINDS  
POLICY INITIATIVE

## Fund loan repayment for mental health professionals

State appropriation to fill a key workforce gap

*As increased demand for mental health services stretches an already overburdened behavioral health workforce, loan repayment programs can be part of a solution to grow critically needed professionals. In 2019, the Mental Health Loan Repayment Act (SB 773) created a framework for a Mental Health Loan Repayment Revolving Fund (MHLRRF), but this program has yet to be funded. **Oklahoma can begin to address its mental health workforce shortage by funding the loan repayment program already authorized in statute.***

### Addressing a public health emergency

- At a time of unprecedented demand for their services, **Oklahoma has critical shortages in almost all major mental health fields** — psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, licensed professional counselors, licensed marriage and family counselors.
- Shortages are especially profound for psychiatrists and psychologists, the most highly-educated professions. **The number of psychiatrists leaving the workforce will exceed those joining the workforce 2-to-1 by 2024.**
- **Mental health need has hit all-time high.** Rural Oklahoma saw a 27% annual increase in suicide during the pandemic, and as much as half of all Oklahomans experienced anxiety or depression since 2020.

### Working for rural Oklahoma

- **Loan repayment programs draw behavioral health professionals to rural areas and keep them there.** Physicians participating in these programs tend to stay in their communities even after completing their obligations.
- Federal loan repayment programs are available to behavioral health professionals in Oklahoma. However, **Oklahoma is one of only 7 states that does not have a state-administered program**, leaving our toolbox short compared to other states.

### A bargain investment

- Federal ARPA dollars not administered by the state are earmarked for mental health loan repayment programs, but it's a competitive grant application. **Oklahoma can sweeten the pot for its application and maximize its investment** by appropriating dollars this year.
- Similar states invest successfully for as little as \$60,000 per psychologist or \$20,000 per mid-level practitioner. **As little as \$1 million in one year could yield 50 critically-needed professionals over the next five years.**