

On COVID-19 front lines? Bill would forgive your student-loan debt

MAY 7, 2020

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What's the news: Proposed legislation aims to offer private and public loan forgiveness for front-line workers delivering care for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic, including physicians, nurses, medical researchers and laboratory professionals.

The Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act was introduced this week by New York Democratic Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney.

“Front-line health workers are delivering care to the sickest patients and putting their own safety at great risk in order to keep doing their jobs,” Maloney said in a statement. “And in return, I believe that we have an obligation to ensure that they are relieved of the debt they incurred to train for this critical work—in graduate degree programs or other professional certification.

“Health care workers are worrying about their own health and how it will affect their families,” Maloney added. “They should not have to worry about their financial security after the crisis has passed. That is a burden that we can lift right now. And this bill will do that. It will help take care of the people taking care of all of us.”

The legislation, supported by the AMA, would establish a federal and private loan-forgiveness program for loans acquired to receive medical and professional training held by health care workers who have made significant contributions to COVID-19 patient care, medical research or testing.

Why it's important: The average medical student graduates with upward of \$200,000 of training-related debt, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. The AMA has long called for legislative action to ease that debt burden and has also supported the continuation of existing federal loan-forgiveness programs.

Throughout the pandemic, the AMA has advocated for financial protections for physicians, residents and medical students. This has included supporting loan relief as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act for medical students and residents, which was signed into law by President Trump in late March.

“Many residents and medical students are playing a critical role in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and providing care to patients on the frontlines,” says a letter sent to congressional leaders by the AMA and many other physician organizations in April. “For residents, COVID-19 is inflicting additional strain as they are redeployed from their primary training programs and put their health on the line caring for the sickest patients, many without appropriate personal protective equipment.

“Some medical schools, such as New York University, are graduating their students early to deploy them to care for patients during this public health crisis,” the letter notes. “For these residents and early graduated medical students, whose debt averages over \$200,000, we urge Congress to provide at least \$20,000 of federal student loan forgiveness or \$20,000 of tuition relief.”

The CARES Act led to the suspension of payments and accrual of interest on most federal student loans for roughly six months through Sept. 30, 2020. The legislation Maloney introduced would extend to private loans and provide forgiveness rather than deferral of payments.

Learn more: The AMA has created a guide that addresses some of the benefits that are currently available for residents and medical students, ranging from loan relief to additional grants to new policies that help make it easier during this challenging time.

The AMA also has curated a selection of resources to help residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.

Stay up to speed on the AMA's COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the fast-moving pandemic with the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.