

nw Northwestern **MENTAL HEALTH CENTER, INC.**

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a non-profit corporation serving NW Minnesota for over 40 years

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February 3, 2015

Representative Debra Kiel
537 State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Support of FF 211, Education Loan Forgiveness Program for Rural Mental Health Professionals

Dear Representative Kiel:

As a Rural and Frontier community mental health provider the Northwestern Mental Health Center (NWMCH), is writing in support of HF 211. In particular, we support the addition of rural mental health professionals to be included in the Minnesota health professional education loan forgiveness program. The NWMHC serves six (6) of the most northwest counties of Minnesota which includes, Kittson, Mahnomen, Marshall, Norman, Polk and Red Lake Counties. The region includes 6,708 square miles with a total population of 61,945 that is roughly the same size as the state of New Jersey, but with an estimated 8.75 people per square mile in this region compared to 1195 people per square mile in New Jersey. (2010 Census Data).

Because of the rural and frontier nature of this region and as the primary mental health safety net provider serving some of the most chronic mental health patients, finding and retaining qualified professionals poses a challenge. Even though we have been fortunate to be recognized by the National Health Services Corp <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/sites/index.html> for their loan repayment program, it has its limitations that do not necessarily meet the needs of our communities.

HF 211 has the opportunity to fill the gap where other loan forgiveness programs lack. For example, allowing mental health professionals to provide services in a school based setting or in various community settings such as in patients home. Being able to provide more than 8 hours a week of tele-health services along with allowing a broad range of educational institutions to qualify for the program will go far in drawing more providers to this area. The success and recovery of individuals with mental health issues requires the provision of services to be located where they have access. For many receiving public mental health services that is where they live, how far they have the financial means to drive or where they go to school.

The NWMHC and as a member of the Minnesota Association of Community Mental Health Programs support this Bill and what it can do to bring needed resources to rural and frontier communities like Northwestern Minnesota. Thank you again for bringing this important issue forward.

Sincerely,

Shauna Reitmeier, MSW
Executive Director Northwestern Mental Health Center sreitmeier@nwmhc.org or (218) 281-0264.