Introduced by Representatives Hango of Berkshire, Durfee of Shaftsbury,
Birong of Vergennes, Gregoire of Fairfield, Harrison of Chittenden, Higley of Lowell, James of Manchester, Morrissey
of Bennington, Page of Newport City, Smith of New Haven,
and Williams of Granby

Referred to Committee on

Date:

Subject: Health; professions and occupations; workforce development;
        scholarships; loan repayment; physician assistants; advanced practice registered nurses

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to establish the Physician Assistant and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Educational Benefit Program to provide scholarship and loan repayment opportunities for students pursuing a master’s degree in physician assistant studies or in nursing, and to individuals who have received a master’s degree in physician assistant studies or nursing, who agree to provide health care services as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in Vermont for two years for each year of scholarship or loan repayment assistance awarded.
An act relating to expanding loan repayment opportunities for physician 
assistants and advanced practice registered nurses

It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

Sec. 1. FINDINGS

The General Assembly finds:

(1) Vermont continues to experience a health care workforce shortage, 
particularly in primary care. In 2018, more than 40 percent of the primary care 
physicians in seven of Vermont’s 14 counties were 60 years of age or older. In 
addition, specialty practices often have long wait times for initial screening and 
diagnostic appointments; increasing the number of physician assistants 
available to deliver these services would increase timely access to health care 
services, especially in rural areas.

(2) Increasing the supply of physician assistants in Vermont may help 
mitigate the nursing workforce shortage by encouraging registered nurses to 
remain in direct patient care roles.

(3) Vermont does not offer any training programs for physician 
assistants. Physician assistants are in high demand across the country, and 
physician assistants are often hired by the same hospitals and clinics they 
experienced during their clinical rotations. Without a physician assistant 
training program in Vermont, fewer physician assistant students have the 
opportunity to learn in Vermont settings and may be less likely to consider or 
receive employment offers from Vermont providers after graduation.
(4) Newly licensed physician assistants often carry significant debt from 
loans taken out to fund their physician assistant education.

(5) Of the existing loan repayment programs for which physician 
assistants are eligible, some favor practice settings like federally qualified 
health centers at the expense of independent practices. Many independent 
practices are located in more rural parts of the State. In addition, some existing 
programs require the employer to provide matching funds, which creates an 
additional barrier to the number of students who may access those programs.

(6) The State has level-funded the appropriation for the State 
educational loan repayment program for which physician assistants are eligible 
since fiscal year 2016, even as tuition for physician assistant training programs 
continues to increase.

Sec. 2. 18 V.S.A. § 34 is added to read:

§ 34. PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT AND ADVANCED PRACTICE 
REGISTERED NURSE EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT PROGRAM

(a) Definitions. As used in this section:

(1) “Eligible individual” means an individual who satisfies the eligibility 
requirements under this section for a scholarship or loan repayment.

(2) “Eligible school” means an approved postsecondary education 
institution, as defined under 16 V.S.A. § 2822.
(3) “Gift aid” means grant or scholarship financial aid received from the federal government or from the State.

(4) “Loan repayment” means the cancellation and repayment of loans under this section.

(5) “Loans” means education loans guaranteed, made, financed, serviced, or otherwise administered by the Corporation under this subchapter for attendance at an eligible school.

(6) “Program” means the Physician Assistant and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Educational Benefit Program created under this section.

(7) “Scholarship” means a scholarship awarded under this section covering tuition, room, board, and the cost of required books and supplies for up to full-time attendance at an eligible school.

(b) Program creation. The Physician Assistant and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Educational Benefit Program is created and shall be administered by the Corporation. The Program provides scholarships to students enrolled in an eligible school who commit to working as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State and who meet the eligibility requirements in subsection (d) of this section. The Program also provides loan repayment on behalf of individuals working as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State and who meet the eligibility requirements in subsection (e) of this section.
(c) The scholarship and loan repayment benefits provided under the Program shall be paid on behalf of the eligible individual by the Corporation, subject to the appropriation of funds by the General Assembly specifically for this purpose.

(d) Eligibility for scholarships. To be eligible for a scholarship under the Program, an individual, whether a resident or nonresident, shall satisfy all of the following requirements:

1. be enrolled at an eligible school in a program that leads to a master’s degree in physician assistant studies or in nursing;
2. continually demonstrate satisfactory academic progress by maintaining a 3.0 grade point average or better or the equivalent as determined by the Corporation if the eligible school does not use grade point averages;
3. have used any available gift aid;
4. have executed a contract with the Corporation committing the individual to work as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State;
5. have executed a promissory note obligating the individual to repay the individual’s scholarship benefit, in whole or in part, if the individual fails to complete the period of service required in subsection (f) of this section; and
6. have completed the Program’s application form, the free application for federal student aid (FAFSA), and the Vermont grant application each
academic year of enrollment in accordance with a schedule determined by the Corporation.

(e) Eligibility for loan repayment. To be eligible for loan repayment under the Program, an individual shall satisfy all of the following requirements:

1. graduated from an eligible school where the individual has, within the past five years, been awarded a master’s degree in physician assistant studies or in nursing;
2. had an overall 3.0 grade point average or better or the equivalent as determined by the Corporation if the eligible school does not use grade point averages from the eligible school;
3. work as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State; and
4. be a resident of Vermont.

(f) Service commitment.

1. Scholarships. For each two years of service as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State, an eligible individual shall be entitled to a full academic year of full scholarship benefit under the Program. If an eligible individual fails to serve as a physician assistant or advanced practice registered nurse in this State for a period that would entitle the individual to the full scholarship benefit received by the individual, other than for good cause as determined by the Corporation, then the individual shall
reimburse the Corporation a pro rata portion of the scholarship paid under the
Program pursuant to the terms of the interest-free reimbursement promissory
note signed by the individual at the time of entering the Program.

(2) Loan repayment. An eligible individual shall be entitled to an
amount of loan cancellation and repayment under this section equal to one year
of loans for every for two years of service as a physician assistant or advanced
practice registered nurse in this State.

(g) Priorities. In light of the lack of physician assistant training programs
in Vermont, first priority for scholarships under the Program shall be for
students enrolled in a program leading to a master’s degree in physician
assistant studies, and first priority for loan repayment under the Program shall
be for individuals recently awarded a master’s degree in physician assistant
studies.

(h) Awards. The Corporation shall award scholarships and loan
repayments in amounts that are sufficient to attract high-quality candidates
while also making a meaningful increase in Vermont’s health care professional
workforce.

(i) Adoption of policies, procedures, and guidelines. The Corporation shall
adopt policies, procedures, and guidelines necessary to implement the
provisions of this section.
(j) Reports. On or before January 15 of each year, the Corporation shall report data and other relevant factors, including the costs of the Program to date, to the House Committees on Health Care and on Commerce and Economic Development; the Senate Committees on Health and Welfare and on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs; and the Governor. The provisions of 2 V.S.A. § 20(d), expiration of reports, shall not apply to the reports to be made under this subsection.

Sec. 3. PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT AND ADVANCED PRACTICE REGISTERED NURSE EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT PROGRAM;

APPROPRIATION

The sum of $200,000.00 in Global Commitment investment funds is appropriated to the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation in fiscal year 2022 for scholarship and loan repayment awards through the Physician Assistant and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Educational Benefit Program established by this act.

Sec. 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This act shall take effect on July 1, 2021.