

Bill Introduced to Legislature to Increase the Length of Deferment for Medical and Dental Students

By Brooke Heath



In Washington last week, Senators Chris Dodd (D-CT), John Kerry (D-MA), Richard Durbin (D-IL), and Russ Feingold introduced the Medical Education Affordability Act (MEAA) to Congress.

If passed, the bill will help to make medical and dental school more affordable for students by extending the length of economic deferment to cover the entire length of a medical or dental residency. Currently, under the Economic Hardship Deferment (EHD) program, students are allowed only three years to suspend payments on their student loans. However, residency programs and fellowship training for medical and dental students can last as long as seven years after medical or dental schooling.

As a result of the rising costs of medical and dental school, students are graduating with more debt than ever. According to Higher Education Washington, Inc.'s *NewsLine*, in 2006, the average medical student graduated with \$130,000 in debt, and recent dental graduates have carried debts of \$145,465.

“As the cost of higher-education tuition rises, far too many students are incurring significant and often unmanageable debt as they struggle to finance the long residencies required by medical and dental degree programs,” said Senator Dodd. “This important legislation will help ensure that students are able to pursue a career in medicine without taking on debilitating debt.”

Students who work in residencies make an average of \$40,000, according to the American Medical Student Association. Because of this, it can be difficult for them to begin making payments on high student loan balances while completing their residencies. If the time allotted for dental and medical residents' deferment periods is extended, students will be able to complete their residencies and establish themselves better financially; therefore, they will be able to afford to repay the high balances they accrued while in school.

“Higher education should not be a luxury available only to the wealthy,” Senator Kerry said. “It’s a test of whether we really believe in opportunity or whether we just say we do. This commonsense legislation will open the door to many students and bring more qualified doctors and dentists into our communities. I’m proud to support this plan, and I thank Senator Dodd for reintroducing the bill.”

This bill is endorsed by several organizations, including the American Medical Student Association, the Association of American Medical Colleges, and the American Dental Education Association.

Leana S. Wen, the national president of the American Medical Student Association supports the bill and said, “We need changes in the laws, such as those proposed by MEAA, to help physicians stay financially viable and in the practice of medicine.”