

BILL ANALYSIS

H.B. 1259
By: Darby
Higher Education
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Rural Texas is experiencing a shortage of veterinarians, particularly large animal practitioners. Many recent veterinary school graduates and current students who would prefer to practice in rural areas are dissuaded by extremely high student loan debt, which reached an average of \$180,000 in 2018, coupled with lower salaries that tend to accompany large animal veterinary careers. A veterinarian shortage in the livestock and agriculture industries increases the strain on existing providers to curb foreign animal diseases that endanger both the food supply and the economic health of the livestock industry in Texas. H.B. 1259 seeks to address this critical shortage of large animal veterinarians by creating the rural veterinarian incentive program, which is designed to carefully select and incentivize veterinarians to serve in high-need areas by providing educational loan assistance in exchange for a commitment to practice in areas of shortage. The bill also seeks to maximize funding by providing a path for interested rural communities to attract, sponsor, and support candidates.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPACT

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly create a criminal offense, increase the punishment for an existing criminal offense or category of offenses, or change the eligibility of a person for community supervision, parole, or mandatory supervision.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the rural veterinarian incentive program committee of the Texas Animal Health Commission in SECTION 2 of this bill.

ANALYSIS

H.B. 1259 amends the Education Code to transfer the administration of the rural veterinarian incentive program from Texas A&M University to the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC). The bill revises provisions relating to the program in the following ways:

- extends eligibility to participate in the program from The Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine to any college of veterinary medicine located in Texas and accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education;
- expands and revises the composition of the rural veterinarian incentive program committee as follows:
 - includes, as representatives of each university system with an accredited college of veterinary medicine other than The Texas A&M University system, the dean of the applicable college and two qualifying veterinarians appointed by the system's board of regents;
 - includes an additional practitioner of veterinary medicine who is a TAHC commissioner, appointed by the TAHC chair; and
 - transfers the role of presiding officer from the dean of the Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine to the executive director of the TAHC;

- raises the population threshold that qualifies a county as a rural county for the purposes of the program from 50,000 to 100,000;
- requires the program committee, in adopting rules related to the selection, submission, or certification of veterinary shortage areas, to consider any applicable regulations adopted under federal law and previous work of the TAHC;
- with regard to a veterinary student's or graduate's participation in the program:
 - requires the program's eligibility criteria to include background and interest in rural practice and removes a required criterion relating to grade point average;
 - extends the application deadline from the first anniversary of the date the person graduates from an eligible veterinary college to the fourth anniversary of that date; and
 - makes a student enrolled in an accredited college of veterinary medicine located outside Texas eligible to apply if the student graduated from a high school or a general academic teaching institution in Texas; and
- with regard to an agreement for financial support between a program participant and a university system:
 - requires the agreement to specify the conditions the participant must satisfy to receive the financial support and to provide that, until the participant satisfies those conditions, any support received constitutes a loan;
 - requires the participant to sign a promissory note to that effect; and
 - changes the form of an award from a grant to a lump sum payable to both the participant and the holder of the affected loan or directly to the loan holder on the participant's behalf.

H.B. 1259 renames the rural veterinarian incentive program fund as the rural veterinarian incentive program account and revises related provisions as follows:

- requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to administer the account in accordance with the bill's provisions;
- moves the account to the general revenue fund;
- revises the composition of the account to include earnings on the account's principal and certain sponsor deposits and to update language describing donations;
- requires money and resources in the account to be made available and payable at the request of the TAHC for the following purposes:
 - the provision of financial support to program participants;
 - program administration costs, capped at seven percent of the account's value; and
 - an amount specifically required for the THECB's administration of the account, capped at three percent of the account's value; and
- establishes that the unexpended account balance at the end of a fiscal year remains in the account subject to further appropriation for the program's purposes.

H.B. 1259 transfers any obligations, rights, contracts, records, real and personal property, funds, appropriations, and money of the rural veterinarian incentive program from The Texas A&M University System to the TAHC on the bill's effective date.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2021.