

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

LAWMAKERS HEAR APPEAL TO LIFT BURDEN OF STUDENT LOANS

By Andy Metzger
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JUNE 19, 2013.....Those charged with helping the neediest appealed to lawmakers Wednesday for a helping hand in the form of a student loan forgiveness program for social workers.

“This is my absolute passion. This is the reason I am here as a social worker today, to advocate for the rights of others,” Jamie Mello told the Joint Committee on Higher Education, which heard testimony on a Rep. William “Smitty” Pignatelli proposal for a \$1.2 million loan forgiveness pilot program available to 100 people working in the field.

“They’re doing some of the most special work at the lowest paid salaries in Massachusetts,” Pignatelli, a Lenox Democrat, told the other members of the committee. He said, “You’re doing God’s work for very little money.”

Mello, a Haverhill resident who said she put herself through college and is looking ahead to repaying \$60,000 in student loans once she completes her final semester of graduate school, was one of several people who testified with similar stories of high debt and low wages.

Dan Graham, a Gloucester resident, said he makes \$27,000 at Lahey Health Behavioral Services and has to forgo his own needs, such as car repairs, because of a lack of money.

“I don’t think any of these non-profits are making money,” said Pignatelli. He said, “You’re being underpaid, and here’s an opportunity to help give you some financial relief through this loan forgiveness. I think that’s very important... ‘Why don’t we just pay them more money?’ Well, if it was that simple, I’d say, ‘Why don’t you pay legislators more money, too?’”

The bill would establish a pilot program under the Board of Higher Education that would pay up to \$250 per month for a period not to exceed 48 months. The funds would be available to social workers making less than 500 percent above the federal poverty level.

“Healthy citizens are the greatest asset a government can have,” said Margaret Wile, of West Newbury, who said she was quoting Winston Churchill. She said social workers are “the glue that fills the gaps” and said they face tough financial choices themselves.

“We’re part of what keeps America great, and keeps people healthy,” Wile said.

Pignatelli said he has filed the bill (H 1077) in past sessions and it has cleared the Higher Education Committee before. He said he hopes that its hearing, coming six months into the two year-session, will give it time to gain traction and become law. Sponsors of other bills are still waiting for hearings.

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