



Massachusetts Society of Optometrists

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May 1, 2015

Honorable Kate Hogan, House Chairwoman
Honorable Jason Lewis, Senate Chairman
Joint Committee on Public Health
State House, Room 130
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Chairwoman Hogan, Chairman Lewis and Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the over 700 members of the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists to strongly support House Bill 2047, An Act Relative to Improving Access to Eye and Vision Care in Rural and Underserved Areas of the Commonwealth. This legislation, which amends Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 111 to create an Eye and Vision Care Center (“the Center”) for rural and underserved communities within the Department of Public Health, will vastly improve the development of training, recruitment and retention of eye and vision care providers.

Like many physicians, optometrists often finish their comprehensive four year, post-graduate education with education debt in excess of \$120,000. HB 2047 will provide a loan repayment and grant program for eye and vision care providers – whether ophthalmologist or optometrist -- choosing to practice in underserved areas. Loan repayment assistance and professional scholarships will assist in removing an impediment to fully serve in-need and low-income communities. Under existing programs, there is no established program meeting the need to develop eye and vision care providers for rural and underserved inner city communities.

Doctors of optometry (ODs) are the primary health care professionals for the eye, they practice in private office setting, nursing homes, community health centers and acute care hospitals. At the forefront of treating individuals in underserved areas, optometrists are required to complete four years of intensive post-graduate education. This education -- just like that of other physicians -- is expensive. A student entering a school of optometry can expect to pay over \$30,000 per year with a total tuition, exclusive of housing and the cost of books. Over four years, this represents over \$120,000 in debt, an amount that often saddles optometrists well into their professional careers, and creates an impediment to fully meeting the needs of underserved communities. This legislation will ensure that eye and vision care practitioners’ debt does not become a deterrent in choosing a geographic area to practice.

That said, this legislation is more than just ensuring optometrists and ophthalmologists are incentivized to work in rural and underserved communities. By passing HB 2047, the Legislature will increase the access to eye and vision care exponentially. As recognized by the American Optometric Association, the American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Public Health Association, rural and inner city communities have a tremendous need for trained eye care professionals. By improving access to eye and vision care practitioners, the Legislature will also improve the affordability of health care in those

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communities by identifying conditions and illness before they become major problems. Time and time again, easy access to eye and vision care providers has demonstrated significant short and long term advantages.

On behalf of the current members of the Massachusetts Society of Optometrists; many of our future members, who are currently enrolled in school today; and those individuals living in underserved areas, I appreciate your consideration of this matter and ask that you release HB 2047 favorably. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Lawless". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "L".

Richard Lawless
Executive Director