

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

STAR Plus Scholarship Act

**Led by Rep. Salinas and Rep. Molinaro
Original Cosponsors: Rep(s) Tonko, Tokuda & Napolitano**

The United States is facing a growing addiction, mental and behavioral health crisis. In 2023, over one in five adults experienced a mental illness, equal to 50 million Americans¹. The majority of adults with a mental illness received no treatment². Additionally, 15% of adults in the United States in 2023 reported a substance use disorder, and 93% did not receive treatment³.

The prevalence of mental and behavioral health conditions in the country is growing, and the demand for mental and behavioral health professionals is increasing alongside it. However, the United States does not have enough mental, behavioral, or substance use disorder providers to meet the needs of Americans living with a mental illness or behavioral or substance use disorder.

In 2023, an estimated 169 million Americans lived in a mental health workforce shortage area⁴. The shortages are even more severe in rural counties, who are much less likely than urban counties to have providers within county limits.

Individuals seeking a provider who speaks their language or looks like them also face additional barriers to care. From 2014-2018, the Hispanic population in the United States increased, but during the same time period, the proportion of mental health facilities offering services in Spanish decreased by 18%⁵. Just 5.5% of licensed psychologists in the United States offer services in Spanish⁶. While around 14% of the U.S. population identifies as Black, just 4% of psychologists are Black and just 2% of psychiatrists⁷.

It is clear we need to address the addiction, mental and behavioral health care workforce shortage to meet the growing needs of Americans. We must also reduce barriers to care for those living in rural areas and people seeking a provider who looks like them or speaks their primary language.

A significant barrier to entry for addiction, mental and behavioral health providers is the cost of school. The average graduate with a master's in social work had \$67,000 in debt

¹ <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/2023-State-of-Mental-Health-in-America-Report.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/2023-State-of-Mental-Health-in-America-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/Behavioral-Health-Workforce-Brief-2023.pdf>

⁵ <https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ps.202100614>

⁶ <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/17/spanish-language-mental-health-services-declining>

⁷ <https://abpsi.org/blackmhworkforce/>

in 2019⁸. This figure was even higher for Black and Hispanic students. Students pursuing graduate degrees in psychology take on an average debt load between \$95,000-\$160,000⁹.

The Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Recovery (STAR) Plus Scholarship Act will address the mental and behavioral health workforce shortage by:

- Creating a scholarship program for students pursuing a degree to provide substance use disorder treatment, mental health and behavioral health services;
 - Students would be eligible for non-taxable scholarships to cover the costs of their programs;
- Requiring students to fulfill their obligations in a mental health shortage area or an area where the mean drug overdose rate exceeds the national average;
 - This bill also includes provisions to recuperate funds from students who do not fulfill their obligations;
- Prioritizing students from groups or populations that are underrepresented in the substance use disorder treatment, behavioral and mental health workforce.
- Authorizing \$75 million dollars

To address the addiction, mental and behavioral crisis in this country, we must reduce barriers to practice for our country's future mental and behavioral health providers. By allowing our students to access scholarships to pursue degrees in these fields, we can address the workforce shortage and create a workforce that better reflects the Americans who need their care.

This legislation is endorsed by: National Association of Social Workers (NASW), NAADAC-The Association for Addiction Professionals, American Psychological Association (APA), American Psychiatric Association (APA), National Council for Mental Wellbeing, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), National Alliance on Mental Illness-Oregon (NAMI-OR), American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), Young Invincibles, American Counseling Association (ACA), American Association of Psychiatric Pharmacists (AAPP), Mental Health & Addiction Certification Board of Oregon (MHACBO), IC&RC, Addiction Professionals of North Carolina, and the Oregon Council of Behavioral Health (OCBH).

⁸ <https://www.socialworkers.org/Advocacy/Policy-Issues/Student-Loan-Debt-Relief-for-Social-Workers/Mental-Health-Professionals-Workforce-Shortage-Loan-Repayment-Act#:~:text=2019%20MSW%20graduates%20have%20a,distributed%20equitably%20within%20the%20profession.>

⁹ <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/tep-tep0000112.pdf>