

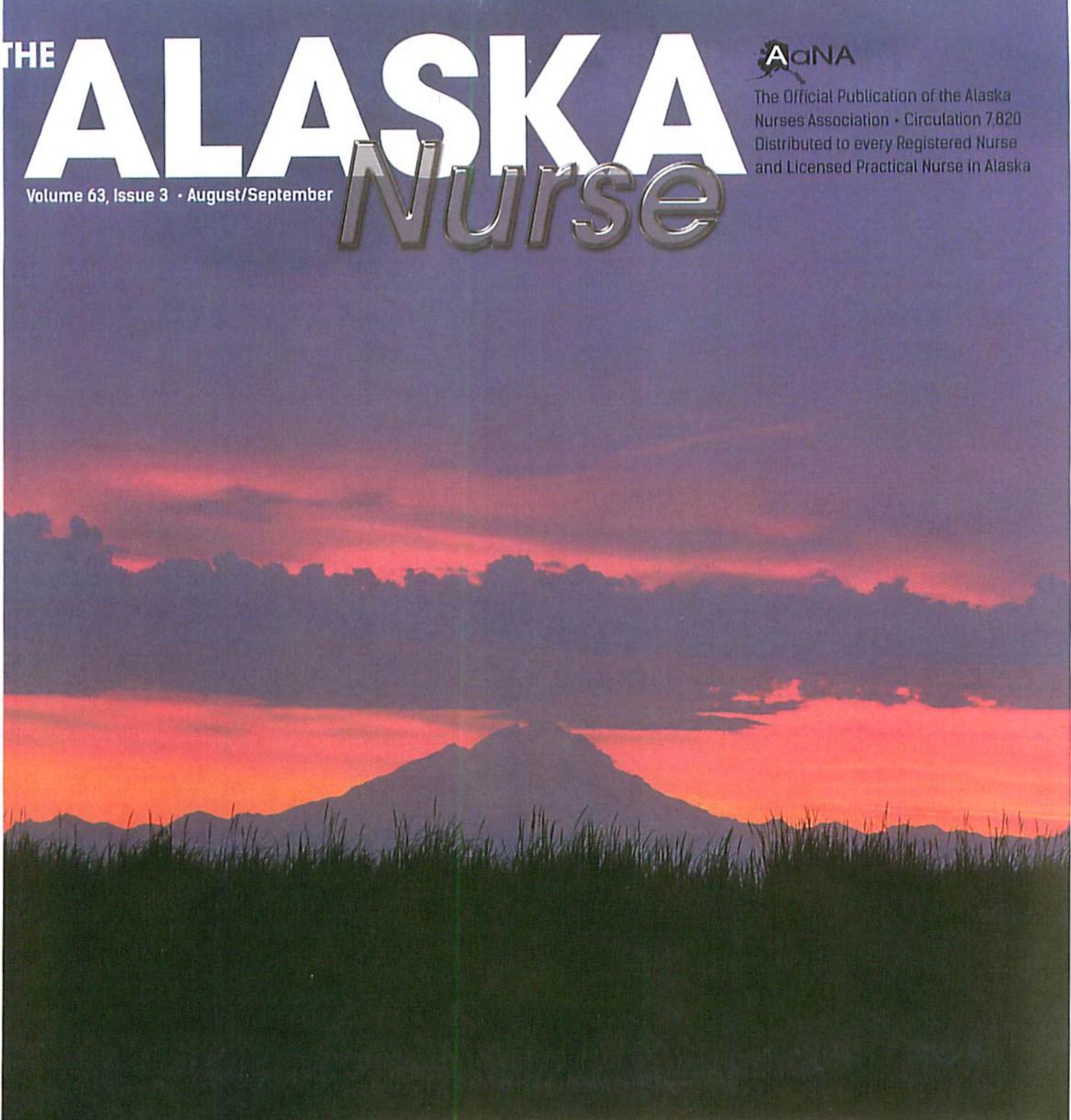
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Alaska's SHARP II

Loan Repayment Program for Alaska's Healthcare Practitioners

For many years the Alaska Nurses Association has testified in support of legislation creating a loan repayment program for healthcare practitioners which would include registered nurses. Our efforts were finally successful in 2012 when HB 78 was passed and signed into law. HB 78 created a loan repayment and direct incentive payments program "to ensure that residents throughout Alaska, including recipients of medical assistance and Medicare, have access

to health care and that residents of rural areas of the state, in particular, experience improved access to health care services."

This legislation called for the establishment of a program to provide both loan repayment and direct incentives to health care workers providing services in difficult-to-serve areas, or to difficult- to-serve populations. The program is administered by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services and has an advisory council

composed of 15 members representing professional associations, healthcare sites, and healthcare professional training centers. AaNA Director of Professional Practice, Patricia Senner, MS, RN, ANP, is the Alaska Nurses Association member of the SHARP II committee.

The program is open to nurses, nurse practitioners, dentists, pharmacists, physicians, dental hygienists, physician assistants, physical therapists, clinical

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psychologists, and clinical social workers holding a master's degree. Applications for loan repayments and direct incentives are made by the healthcare practitioner's employer. The employers are required to commit to paying a portion of the loan repayment or direct incentive costs, depending on employer's financial resources. Applications can only be submitted for individuals currently employed by a healthcare institution, and funds cannot be used as an incentive for individuals to fill vacancies. The program provides quarterly payments which may continue for up to three years.

The first round of the SHARP II program in 2013 received 91 applicants. 74 of these applicants met all criteria for the program and were forwarded on to the advisory council for consideration. A total of 46 individuals were selected from this group by the advisory council to receive funds. All 4 RNs and 6 ANPs who applied were accepted.

The council spent considerable time developing criteria for the evaluation of applicants. Top priority was given to individuals accepting very difficult-to-fill positions as defined in regulation. After this, the Council accepted applicants from a variety of professional groups, geographic settings, and employers.

A very sobering aspect of the program is the amount of debt being carried by Alaskan healthcare providers. Physician and dentist applicants are commonly burdened by \$200,000 to \$300,000 in student loan debt. Nurse Practitioner applicants were weighed down by \$30,000 to \$150,000 in loan debt. RNs were commonly carrying \$20,000 to \$30,000.

The statute setting up the SHARP II program requires that three recipients from each healthcare provider group be employed in very difficult-to-fill slots. This requirement was not fully met with the first round of applicants, so the Department of Health and Social Services is administering a second round of requests for applications.

If you are interested in being part of this program, contact Robert Sewell, PhD., SHARP Program Manager at robert.sewell@alaska.gov. The application window is now open from August 8th until September 30th, and 45 clinicians are being solicited.



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