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## Loan program sought for rural dentists

By **Jim McLean**  
KHI News Service

TOPEKA, Feb. 27 — Dental students who agree to practice in underserved areas of Kansas would receive financial help from the state under a bill proposed by the Kansas Dental Association.

Senate Bill 597 would provide students with loans of \$8,000 a year starting in their second year of dental school. While in school, the students would negotiate practice agreements with underserved communities. Students who abide by those agreements wouldn't have to repay the loans.

As envisioned, the program also would allow communities that negotiate practice agreements to match the loans provided by the state. But language specifically authorizing that was inadvertently left out of the bill when it was drafted.

"The development of a dental loan forgiveness program would create a valuable resource in efforts to recruit dental providers into Kansas," Joyce Tibbals, assistant director, Rural Health Education Services at the University of Kansas Medical Center, told the Senate Ways & Means Committee Wednesday during a hearing on the bill.

The KU Medical Center would administer the loan program, which would be similar to a one it administers for medical students. The program would cost an estimated \$169,000 a year.

Teresa Schwab, executive director of the Oral Health Kansas coalition, said 14 Kansas counties do not have full-time practicing dentists. Many others, she said, are underserved.

A recent survey by the Rural Health and Education Services indicated that 58 percent of dental students said they had more than \$100,000 in debt, Schwab said.

"In that same report, nearly 70 percent of students indicated that their decision regarding where to practice would be influenced by the availability of loans to help pay debt accumulated from dental school," Schwab said.

Sen. Chris Steineger, D-Kansas City, said if the Legislature approves the loan program other providers will show up "one after another" seeking similar assistance from the state.

"It just speaks to the underlying problem," he said. "Some parts of rural Kansas are just going to be really, really hard to re-develop. At some point some of these towns aren't economically viable anymore."

Sen. Laura Kelly, D-Topeka, said she would like to see the bill tightened so that students who receive the loans would end up practicing in truly needy parts of the state.

"We create these programs to get providers in rural areas, but there are so many loopholes that allow them to serve their time in places they don't need to be," Kelly said.

The bill currently says that students in the loan program can practice anywhere but the state's five most urban counties — Douglas, Johnson, Sedgwick, Shawnee and Wyandotte.

But Kevin Robertson, the dental association's executive director, told Kelly the organization was open to making changes in the bill to address her concerns and those of members who said the estimated \$73,000 cost of

administering the program was too high.

"We might have to keep massaging the bill," he said.

Because the bill is in an exempt committee it doesn't have to be out of the Senate by this week's deadline for bills to be passed out of their house of origin.

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