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## **Business, Health Groups Urge Senate to Act Quickly on Doctor Shortage**

*Texas Voters Overwhelmingly Support Loan Repayment Initiative*

**AUSTIN, Texas** – Citing definitive results from a new statewide poll, business and health groups today urged the Senate to act quickly on legislation that will address Texas' doctor shortage by providing substantial investment in debt relief for primary care physicians practicing in medically underserved rural, border and inner-city communities.

The poll by Baselice & Associates found overwhelming support for House Bill 2154, which would fund a loan repayment program for physicians who practice in medically underserved areas of Texas by closing a tax loophole in the way Texas taxes smokeless tobacco products.

The poll, by the Texas Academy of Family Physicians (TAFP), found that seven of nine Texas voters say it's more important for the Legislature to address the state's physician shortage than it is to keep taxes low on discount tobacco products.

"Texas faces a current and growing crisis in health care—we've got a shortage of primary care physicians. Chief among the multiple factors contributing to Texas' shrinking supply of physicians is the fact that the average medical school graduate carries a debt of more than \$130,000," said TAFP CEO Tom Banning. "The Legislature has within its means to solve this problem by passing HB 2154. Our poll clearly shows that Texans overwhelmingly support a loan repayment program; the only opposition is from the tobacco lobbyists."

Business and health groups called on the Senate to act quickly on addressing this crisis that the majority of Texas voters want solved. The Texas House has approved HB 2154, and the measure is currently awaiting a hearing before the Senate Finance Committee.

"The best news from the poll is that by simply closing a tax loophole the state would have an additional \$90 million to entice doctors to practice where they are needed most. This opportunity is too important an issue for the Senate to ignore. Texas' severe – and growing – shortage of physicians must be addressed immediately," said Texas Association of Business President and CEO Bill Hammond.

The poll found two-thirds of Texas voters, 64 percent, favor (32 percent strongly) a physician loan repayment program and support intensifies when funding comes from tobacco tax revenues. The telephone survey sampled 600 registered voters in Texas between May 16 and 17, 2009, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.1 percent.

Sixty-three percent of poll respondents favored the loan repayment plan because it will increase access to health care physicians and help contain health care costs by reducing hospital admissions, emergency room visits and surgeries.

“The lack of access to primary care physicians carries an enormous associated cost for the state of Texas. A study by Brandeis University of Medicaid costs in rural Texas found that improved access to primary care physicians would have saved the program almost \$1 billion, and the rural component of Medicaid is a very small percentage of the overall program,” said Texas Association of Community Health Centers Executive Director Jose E. Camacho.

Key findings of the poll include:

- 78 percent of voters (62 percent strongly) favor “addressing the physician shortage” over “keeping taxes low on discount tobacco products.”
- 64 percent favor (32 percent strongly) state repaying medical school loans of doctors who agree to practice in medically underserved areas.
- 63 percent favor (38 percent strongly) favor the loan repayment program when informed funds will come from closing the tax loophole on smokeless tobacco.

HB 2154 restructures the state excise tax on smokeless tobacco by assessing the tax on a per unit basis instead of on its sales price, which is the current practice. The current method allows discount smokeless brands to be taxed at substantially lower rates than other brands. The estimated \$90 million in additional revenue from closing the loophole would fund the loan repayment program for doctors who practice in inner city and rural areas.

More than half of Texas’ 254 counties need more primary care physicians with 114 counties failing to meet the national standard of one physician for every 3,500 people.

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