

Date of Hearing: April 7, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
Mike Fong, Chair
AB 1591 (Michelle Rodriguez) – As Introduced January 15, 2026

SUBJECT: California Podiatric Pipeline Program

SUMMARY: Requires the Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI) to establish and administer the California Podiatric Pipeline Program to promote careers in podiatric medicine and support the educational advancement of California residents pursuing the doctor of podiatric medicine degree. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires HCAI, in consultation with the California State University (CSU), the University of California (UC), the Podiatric Medical Board of California, the California Podiatric Medical Association, and accredited schools of podiatric medicine in California, to take actions that include, but are not limited to, all of the following:
 - a) Developing partnerships and agreements that link undergraduate institutions with California podiatric medical schools;
 - b) Providing mentorship, outreach, and clinical-shadowing opportunities for undergraduate students interested in podiatric medicine;
 - c) Creating a structured pathway for eligible students to receive early admission consideration to participating podiatric medical schools, contingent on meeting academic and professional benchmarks; and,
 - d) Prioritizing recruitment of students from underrepresented, rural, or medically underserved areas of the state.
- 2) Authorizes HCAI to award planning or coordination grants to participating universities or colleges to support implementation of this program as funding is made available.
- 3) Authorizes HCAI to use funds from the Health Professions Education Fund (HPEF) for the purposes of this bill.
- 4) Requires HCAI, subject to an appropriation by the Legislature, to annually report to the Legislature on the number of students participating, the number matriculating into doctor of podiatric medicine programs, and recommendations for expanding residency opportunities for podiatric graduates.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Differentiates the missions and functions of public and independent institutions of higher education. Under these provisions:
 - a) The primary mission of the CSU is to offer undergraduate and graduate instruction through the master's degree in the liberal arts and sciences and professional education

including teacher education. The CSU is authorized to establish two-year programs only when mutually agreed upon by the Trustees and the CCC Board of Governors (BOG). The CSU is also authorized to jointly award the doctoral degree with the UC and with one or more independent institutions of higher education;

- b) The UC is authorized to provide undergraduate and graduate instruction and has exclusive jurisdiction in public higher education over graduate instruction in the professions of law, medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. The UC is also the primary state-supported academic agency for research;
 - c) The independent institutions of higher education are required to provide undergraduate and graduate instruction and research in accordance with their respective missions; and
 - d) The mission and function of the California Community Colleges (CCC) is the offering of academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level, and the CCC are authorized to grant the Associate in Arts and the Associate in Science degrees. The community colleges are also required to offer learning supports to close learning gaps, English as a Second Language instruction, and adult noncredit instruction, and support services which help students succeed at the postsecondary level. (Education Code (EDC) Section 66010.4)
- 2) Establishes HCAI to, among other functions, collect, analyze, and publish data about healthcare workforce and health professional training, identify areas of health workforce shortages, and provide scholarships, loan repayments, and grants to students, graduates, and institutions providing direct patient care in areas of unmet need. (Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 127000, Section 127825, et seq.)
- 3) Establishes the Health Professions Education Fund within HCAI to provide loans to students. Authorizes HCAI to receive private donations and specifies that all money in the fund is continuously appropriated to HCAI. (HSC Section 128355)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS: *Double-referral.* AB 1591 (M. Rodriguez) was heard by the Assembly Committee on Health, where it passed with a 16-0 vote.

Purpose. According to the author, “California is facing a growing shortage of Doctors of Podiatric Medicine, particularly in rural and underserved communities. More than half of our counties lack adequate podiatric coverage, and nearly one quarter of the current workforce is expected to retire within five years. At the same time, enrollment in podiatric medical schools is declining, threatening our ability to meet future demand. This shortage has serious consequences. Diabetes disproportionately impacts low-income communities and communities of color, and limited access to specialized foot care contributes to preventable hospitalizations and amputations. Yet, current law does not provide a structured pathway to recruit and prepare students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, for careers in podiatric medicine.”

The author contends that AB 1591 (M. Rodriguez), "...creates a coordinated undergraduate to medical school pathway to expand the workforce, increase diversity in the profession, and improve access to preventive care in underserved areas. This bill is a proactive step toward protecting mobility, preventing amputations, and ensuring equitable access to essential podiatric services statewide."

Doctors of Podiatric Medicine (DOPMs). DOPMs are podiatric physicians and surgeons, qualified by their education, training, and experience to diagnose and treat conditions affecting the foot, ankle, and related structures of the leg. Podiatric medicine is a medical sub-specialty, focused on a specific part of the anatomy similar to other sub-specialties, such as ophthalmology and cardiology. Within the field of podiatric medicine and surgery, podiatrists can focus on specialty areas such as surgery, sports medicine, biomechanics, geriatrics, pediatrics, orthopedics, or primary care. DOPMs receive basic and clinical science education and training comparable to that of medical doctors including: four years of undergraduate education focusing on life sciences; four years of graduate study in one of the nine podiatric medical colleges; and, at least three years of postgraduate, hospital-based residency training.

Declining DOPM school enrollment. California is home to two schools of podiatric medicine, Western U College of Podiatric Medicine in Pomona, and the California School of Podiatric Medicine at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland. In 2024-2025, Western U was at 62% capacity (38% of seats open) for the matriculating first year cohort. Samuel Merritt was at 52% capacity the same year.

Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI). As noted in *Existing Law* above, HCAI was established to, among other functions, collect, analyze, and publish data about healthcare workforce and health professional training, identify areas of health workforce shortages, and provide scholarships, loan repayments, and grants to students, graduates, and institutions providing direct patient care in areas of unmet need.

HCAI administers numerous workforce programs, as well as providing loans and scholarships to health care professionals.

Health Professions Education Fund (HPEF). HPEF is funded solely through donations. All donated funds have been fully allocated, and HPEF has not received any new contributions to support new programs. HPEF previously supported the following programs:

- 1) Licensed Mental Health Services Provider Education Program Loan Repayment.
- 2) Bachelor of Science Nursing Loan Repayment Program.
- 3) Licensed Vocational Nurse Loan Repayment Program.
- 4) Steven M. Thompson Physician Corps Loan Repayment Program.
- 5) Associate Degree Nursing Scholarship Program.
- 6) Bachelor of Science Nursing Scholarship Program.
- 7) Licensed Vocational Nurse to Associate Degree Nursing Scholarship Program.

- 8) Vocational Nurse Scholarship Program;
- 9) Advanced Practice Healthcare Scholarship Program; and,
- 10) Allied Healthcare Scholarship Program.

HPEF currently has an estimated \$8.2 million in funds. Of the total funds, \$5 million belongs to Covered California's Population Health Investments program, and \$3.2 million is designated for scholarships and loan repayment purposes. HCAI does not consider these funds to be usable or available for discretionary spending, as they are restricted to their dedicated purposes.

Health Professions Pathways Program (HPPP). HPPP is designed to recruit and support students from underrepresented regions and backgrounds to pursue health careers. HPPP includes pipeline programs, summer internships, and post undergraduate fellowships. HPPP is a competitive grant opportunity to award organizations that will develop and implement health professions pathways programs that can include pipeline programs, summer internships, and post undergraduate fellowships. Including podiatrists, the following disciplines are HPPP-eligible: Primary Care, Behavioral Health, Nursing, Oral Health, and Allied Health.

Awarded programs were eligible to receive up to \$575,000 annually for up to 5 years to support at least 240 students per academic year. Based on previous award levels, each pipeline program awarded for 5 years would require approximately \$2.9 million per pipeline program.

Committee comments. As noted in the Assembly Committee on Health analysis, this bill authorizes HCAI to use funds from the HPEF for the purpose of this bill, however HCAI does not believe those funds are available for this purpose and has identified the HPPP as a more appropriate pathway. Moving forward, the author should work with HCAI to clarify the potential funding source for the program proposed by this bill.

Arguments in support. According to the California Podiatric Medical Association (CPMA), DOPMs "...play a critical role in the health care system. Once licensed, they independently diagnose and treat human ailments within their specialty, including performing surgery in hospital and ambulatory settings, prescribing medications, ordering diagnostic studies, and interpreting imaging. They diagnose and treat a wide range of conditions affecting the foot, ankle, and lower extremities, including diabetic foot ulcers, infections, fractures, deformities, nerve disorders, sports injuries, chronic wounds, and mobility impairments. Their expertise is particularly essential in the management of diabetes, where early intervention and specialized care can prevent severe complications."

CPMA continues that "California is facing a significant and growing shortage of doctors of podiatric medicine, particularly in rural and medically underserved communities. More than half of California counties have fewer than one licensed podiatrist per 25,000 residents, and nearly one-quarter of practicing DPMs plan to retire within the next five years... AB 1591, the California Podiatric Pipeline Program Act, addresses this gap by directing the Office of Health Care Access and Information to work with stakeholders and establish a structured undergraduate-to-podiatric medical school pathway through coordinated educational institutional partnerships, increase awareness and introduce students to the profession, support student's academic and clinical development, create early or conditional admission incentives for qualified applicants

tied to workforce needs, and promote mentorship opportunities, internships, and clinical shadowing experiences with licensed [DOPMs].”

Prior legislation. SB 909 (Umberg), Chapter 594, Statutes of 2024 made numerous changes to the parameters of the Steven M. Thompson Physician Corps Loan Repayment Program (STLRP).

AB 1306 (Arambula, 2021) would have authorized HCAI to address identified barriers to entry in the health professions for students from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds by funding internships and fellowships and by establishing pilot programs UC, California State University, CSU, and private university campuses to serve 4,800 students. AB 1306 was held on the Senate Appropriations Committee suspense file.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Podiatric Medical Association

Opposition

None on file

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