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## SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Senator Akilah Weber Pierson, Chair

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**BILL NO:** AB 1591  
**AUTHOR:** Michelle Rodriguez  
**VERSION:** May 18, 2026  
**HEARING DATE:** July 1, 2026  
**CONSULTANT:** Natalie Gehred

**SUBJECT:** California Podiatric Pipeline Program

**SUMMARY:** Creates the California Podiatric Pipeline Program to support and promote careers in podiatric medicine. Authorizes the Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI) to use funds from the Health Professions Education Fund or Health Professions Pathways Program to implement the program. Requires HCAI to annually, upon appropriation, report performance metrics to the Legislature, along with recommendations for expanding opportunities for podiatric graduates.

**Existing law:**

- 1) Establishes HCAI and requires it to establish a health care workforce research and data center to serve as the central source of health care workforce and educational data in the state, responsible for the collection, analysis, and distribution of information on the educational and employment trends and distribution of health care occupations in the state. Establishes the Health Workforce Education and Training Council within HCAI to coordinate California's health workforce education and training to meet the state's health care needs. [HSC §127000, §128050, and §128250]
- 2) Requires HCAI to maintain a Health Professions Career Opportunity Program to, among other things, implement programs at colleges and universities and include in those programs pipeline programs to support students from underrepresented regions and backgrounds to pursue health careers. [HSC §127885]
- 3) Creates the Health Professions Education Fund, for the primary purpose of providing scholarships and loans to students from underrepresented groups who are accepted to or enrolled in schools of medicine, dentistry, nursing, or other health professions. Authorizes HCAI to receive private donations to be deposited into the fund and continuously appropriates all moneys in the fund to HCAI. [HSC §128355]

**This bill:**

- 1) Requires 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.
- 2) Requires HCAI to consult the California State University, the University of California, the Podiatric Medical Board of California (PMBC), the California Podiatric Medical Association, and accredited schools of podiatric medicine in California to:
  - a) Develop partnerships and agreements that link undergraduate institutions with California podiatric medical schools;
  - b) Provide mentorship, outreach, and clinical-shadowing opportunities for undergraduate students interested in podiatric medicine;

- c) Create 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) Prioritize recruitment of students from underrepresented, rural, or medically underserved areas of the state.
- 3) Permits HCAI to use funds from the Health Professions Education Fund or Health Professions Pathways Program for the purposes of this bill.
  - 4) Requires HCAI, subject to appropriation by the Legislature, to annually report to the Legislature the number of students participating, the number matriculating into doctor of podiatric medicine programs, and recommendations for expanding residency opportunities for podiatric graduates.
  - 5) Makes the implementation of this bill contingent upon appropriation by the Legislature and sunsets its provisions on January 1, 2032.

**FISCAL EFFECT:** According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, HCAI estimates General Fund costs of \$899,000 in fiscal year 2026-27 and ongoing for administration, program oversight, and monitoring. To award planning and coordination grants to universities and colleges, staff would need to establish grant standards and procedures, review and approve grant applications, issue funds to awardees, monitor the awarded funds, and annually develop a report for the Legislature. HCAI anticipates it would need five staff.

**PRIOR VOTES:**

Assembly Floor:	78 - 0
Assembly Appropriations Committee:	11 - 0
Assembly Higher Education Committee:	10 - 0
Assembly Health Committee:	16 - 0

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) *Author's statement.* According to the author, California is facing a growing shortage of Doctors of Podiatric Medicine (DPMs), 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 California Podiatric Pipeline Program Act 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.
- 2) *Podiatrists.* According to the PMBC, DPMs are licensed to diagnose and treat conditions affecting the foot, ankle and related structures including the tendons that insert into the foot. DPMs receive their degree from a four-year accredited college of podiatric medicine.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), courses for a DPM are similar to those for other medical degrees, and students complete clinical rotations while in school. After earning a DPM, podiatrists must complete a hospital-based podiatric medicine and surgery residency program, and some podiatrists further specialize with fellowships in wound care, diabetic foot care, or limb preservation. Podiatrists practice in a variety of settings, hospitals, health system clinics, multispecialty groups or standalone practices. BLS projects that the national job outlook is expected to grow by 2% between 2024-2034, slightly slower than the 3% average increase for all occupations. The PMBC currently licenses over 2,200 podiatric practitioners. According to the Department of Consumer Affairs, DPM license renewals have remained steady since 2021, at about 1,055 licenses renewed each year. The PMBC also reports a relatively stable rate of new DPM license approvals over the past decade, approving between 75 to 112 licenses annually since 2016, with new approvals hovering around 95 per year since 2022.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), podiatrists play a crucial role in detecting and treating foot problems in people with diabetes, which affects about 10% of the adult population in California, according to the American Diabetes Association. Diabetes complications can include nerve damage, joint damage, and blood vessel damage, which increase the risk for developing foot ulcers that, in some cases, cause infections that may result in the need for amputation. The CDC, on their webpage for providers about foot health, recommends asking patients with diabetes if they visit a podiatrist for a comprehensive foot exam at least once a year, and to consider referring patients to podiatrists or providing them with more information about recommended foot care for people with diabetes.

- 3) *Funding sources.* While this bill includes HCAI's Health Professions Education Fund as a source of funding, the program it supports is primarily an individual loan repayment and scholarship program for licensed or future medical professionals who commit to working in medically underserved areas. Its primary purpose is to recruit and retain providers in areas with workforce shortages. According to HCAI, the Health Professions Pathways Program, part of the Health Professions Careers Opportunity Program, is designed to build the long-term health workforce pipeline by recruiting and supporting students from underrepresented regions and backgrounds at earlier stages of their careers. Rather than providing loan repayment to individual practitioners, the program awards grants to organizations that develop and implement pathway programs. Eligible activities include pipeline initiatives, summer internships, hands-on learning experiences, post-undergraduate fellowships, and post-baccalaureate preparation programs that help students enter health professional training. For the upcoming grant cycle, the program has also partnered with Covered California to offer post-baccalaureate scholarships.
- 4) *Related legislation.* AB 2398 (Alvarez) would have required HCAI to convene a workgroup to discuss graduate medical education capacity in California, with a focus on access to residency positions, and, in consultation with the Medical Board of California, to report recommendations for increasing residency capacity in California, improving geographic and specialty distribution, and reducing barriers to entry, including for international medical graduates. *AB 2398 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*
- 5) *Support.* The California Podiatric Medical Association, the sponsors of the bill, writes that California is facing a significant and growing shortage of DPMs, particularly in rural and medically underserved communities. They highlight that more than half of California counties have fewer than one licensed podiatrist per 25,000 residents, and nearly one-quarter

of practicing podiatrists plan to retire within the next five years—the highest projected retirement rate among health care provider groups. At the same time, the educational pipeline into the profession is shrinking: during the 2024–2025 academic year, California’s podiatric medical schools operated at between 52% to 62% capacity for incoming students. They assert this bill addresses a declining workforce by creating a coordinated, state-supported pathway to recruit and prepare undergraduate students for podiatric medical education and is designed to strengthen the diversity and cultural competency of California’s health care workforce. The Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities reiterate that two of their member universities, the state’s only accredited podiatric medical schools, are experiencing declining application numbers in line with national trends, resulting in fewer new DPMs entering the workforce. These two schools, Samuel Merritt University and the Western University of Health Sciences, write to support efforts to increase awareness of podiatric medicine, strengthening educational pathways, and supporting long-term workforce sustainability for individuals pursuing careers in podiatric medicine in California. Lastly, California Primary Care Association Advocates write that, for community health center patients dealing with diabetes, access to a podiatrist is critical to access specialized foot care to prevent hospitalization and amputations. Prioritizing recruitment of students from rural and medically underserved communities and providing mentorship and early clinical exposure will help remove barriers to entry into podiatric medical education and encourage students to practice in the communities that need them most.

- 6) *Amendments.* The Chair requests an amendment to more closely align the findings and declarations with current state workforce data:

**SEC. 2.** The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:

- ~~(a) California faces a growing shortage of Doctors of Podiatric Medicine particularly in rural and underserved communities.~~
- ~~(b)~~ (a) Many undergraduate students are unaware of podiatric medicine as a career path and lack opportunities for mentorship and exposure to the field.
- ~~(c)~~ (e) Establishing an undergraduate-to-podiatric-medical-school pathway will increase awareness, diversity, and the number of students entering podiatric programs in California.
- ~~(d)~~ (e) Two accredited podiatric medical schools operate in California, the California School of Podiatric Medicine at Samuel Merritt University and the Western University of Health Sciences College of Podiatric Medicine, and can serve as anchor partners for such a pipeline.

**SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION:**

**Support:** California Podiatric Medical Association (sponsor)  
 Association of Independent California Colleges & Universities  
 California Primary Care Association Advocates  
 Samuel Merritt University  
 Western University of Health Sciences

**Oppose:** None received