

Supporting Underrepresented Minority Physicians in Rural Residencies

- This brief explores how rural residencies can support recruitment and retention of underrepresented physicians in rural areas.
- Medical educators must recruit underrepresented physicians into rural residency programs and provide a supportive environment.
- Policymakers can support recruitment efforts by ensuring adequate and dedicated funding for residency programs' recruitment efforts, and by expanding state and federal financial incentives for underrepresented residents in rural areas.

ISSUE:

To ensure adequate and equitable access to patient care for increasingly diverse rural populations, New York State must support the recruitment of underrepresented physicians to rural communities. Residency programs may encourage physicians to plant roots and build a future in rural areas; however, simply creating new rural programs or increasing the number of rural residency slots does not guarantee recruitment of diverse resident physicians.

BACKGROUND:

A recent NYSARH brief explored the critical need for underrepresented physicians in rural communities to address healthcare disparities and provide care for increasingly diverse populations (see NYSARH Issue Brief: *Bridging the Diversity Gap in Rural Healthcare by Recruiting Underrepresented Minority Physicians*). That brief highlighted the potential for local residency programs to help support recruitment to rural areas and outlined national and state initiatives to increase rural residency training opportunities. While these efforts are essential to increase rural physician capacity, simply adding new slots to existing programs - or even creating new programs or tracks - does not guarantee that physicians from underrepresented backgrounds will apply. Three potential strategies could increase the appeal of rural residencies: purposeful recruitment, cultivating supportive environments, and financial incentives.

Purposeful Recruitment Strategies

To attract underrepresented medical students to rural residencies, residency training programs need supplementary funding to support targeted recruitment activities. Recruitment begins early in the medical education process, through medical student clinical rotations and conference participation and exhibiting. Hosting clinical rotations for medical students is effective in encouraging applications to associated residencies.¹ Scholarships, stipends, and travel assistance can encourage and support underrepresented medical student rotations, especially in the months leading up to interview season.¹ Programs recruit students in exhibit halls of medical conferences, but the costs to exhibit may restrict

smaller programs' outreach. Funding earmarked for recruitment of underrepresented students could encourage participation at national and regional conferences targeted towards underrepresented students and physicians.²

Cultivating Supportive Environments

Positive experiences during residency can increase retention of physicians in the community after completing training. Underrepresented students are attracted to programs that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion,³ supported by robust cultural competency curricula and learning supports.⁴ Physicians who feel integrated and welcomed in their communities are more likely to stay to serve their rural areas over the long term.⁵ Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) and other community-based groups can provide opportunities for social integration and community engagement.⁶

Financial Incentives for Rural Residency

Scholarships, loan repayment programs and loan forgiveness programs are effective in recruiting and retaining physicians in underserved areas.⁷ Scholarships offered during medical school require a return of service following completion of residency training (e.g. National Health Service Corps). Loan repayment programs are targeted at physicians in practice, offering loan repayment funds for years spent in rural underserved areas (e.g. Doctors Across New York). Loan forgiveness programs (e.g. Public Service Loan Forgiveness) discharge the balance of a loan following the completion of a set number of years in practice. Extending these programs to support underrepresented physicians during residency training may encourage resident recruitment and retention in rural communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Ensure adequate funding for rural residency programs to provide early engagement opportunities for medical students*
 - a. Access to supplementary funding for exhibiting and recruiting at medical conferences directed towards underrepresented populations.
 - b. Financial support for underrepresented medical students during elective rotations with rural residency programs: e.g., housing and travel assistance.
2. *Support success and belonging for underrepresented residents in rural residencies*
 - a. Ensure continued funding for Area of Health Education Centers.
 - b. Establish new sources of funds for residencies to create and sustain cultural competency and diversity curricula.
3. *Expand or create state and federal financial incentive programs*
 - a. Sustain and expand state programs such as Doctors Across New York to provide loan forgiveness for underrepresented residents beginning during rural residency training.
 - b. Sustain and expand federal programs (e.g., NHSC) to provide funding during residency and/or include residency training periods towards return-of-service.

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