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Colorado Health Foundation program brings doctors to underserved areas
15 physicians benefit from grant to serve rural and urban Colorado communities

With many rural and urban communities in the state facing a critical shortage of primary care physicians, the [Physician Loan Repayment Program](#) (PLRP), sponsored by the [Colorado Health Foundation](#), will give [15 doctors](#) money to repay their student loans in exchange for practicing in underserved areas where their services are desperately needed.

Since the PLRP launched in 2008, the Foundation has awarded 47 grants to physicians and clinics for repayment, totaling \$5.4 million in funds. The awards go to doctors who agree to practice in [Rural Health Clinics](#) (RHCs), [Federally Qualified Health Centers](#) (FQHCs), or [Community-Funded safety-net facilities](#) in rural or underserved urban communities throughout Colorado. Doctors who participate in the program can receive as much as \$150,000 in three years to defray their student loan debts. By picking up the tab for student loans, the PLRP gives doctors a financial incentive to offset the challenges of practicing in an underserved community. The [Colorado Rural Health Center](#) (CRHC) and the [Colorado Community Health Network](#) administer the program on behalf of the Foundation.

Along with helping physicians, the grant money also benefits the clinics that serve rural uninsured and underinsured patients. Typically, it is difficult to recruit and retain physicians in rural areas because of the location, lack of resources, higher cost of providing care, and fewer benefits that come with providing rural care. The communities that need physicians most have the fewest resources to recruit them -- a dynamic that can compromise the overall health of the community and quality of life. Through financial support, clinics find it easier to recruit physicians to rural and urban underserved areas, many of whom find job satisfaction and remain in the community after their three-year grant commitment expires.

While there are fewer physicians working in rural areas, Colorado's 52 RHCs serve over 175,000 rural Coloradans per year. Currently, 43 of Colorado's 64 counties are designated as rural or

frontier. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment reports that Colorado currently needs 181 full-time primary care physicians to meet the needs of underserved areas, the majority of which are needed in rural Colorado.

"Through loan repayment programs like PLRP, rural and underserved clinics are able to provide critical incentives to physicians to serve the growing uninsured and underinsured populations," says Lou Ann Wilroy, Chief Executive Officer for Colorado Rural Health Center. "On average, it takes over a year to fill a primary care position in rural Colorado, leaving the community without access to care for extended periods of time. Programs like PLRP are essential to filling positions more readily and providing Coloradans care close to home."

Meanwhile, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment estimates the demand for family and general practitioners will increase by 28 percent by 2014. The increase in demand for physicians is fueled by an aging baby boomer generation, changing work expectations of physicians and a growing number of individuals relying on safety-net clinics for their health care.

A [complete list](#) of the PLRP grant recipients can be obtained through the [Colorado Health Foundation's Website](#).

About the Colorado Rural Health Center

CRHC is Colorado's nonprofit State Office of Rural Health. CRHC works with Federal, state and local partners to offer services and resources to rural healthcare providers, facilities and communities. CRHC's mission is to support and enhance healthcare services in the state to ensure that all rural Coloradans have access to comprehensive, affordable, high quality healthcare. For more information on CRHC, visit www.coruralhealth.org.