

Wisconsin Hospital Association, Inc.



Contact: Mary Kay Grasmick, WHA 608-274-1820 or 575-7516 (cell)

**Physician Shortage Hits Wisconsin Hard
Vacancies Statewide Reach “Unprecedented” Levels**

MADISON (February 6, 2006)----- The number of physician vacancies in Wisconsin has reached unprecedented levels, according to the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, which has successfully placed nearly 400 physicians in rural and urban communities in the past 26 years, including many in areas designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs).

Randy Munson, physician recruiter with the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health Physician Placement Program, reports over 300 positions open currently for physicians here in Wisconsin. Roughly half of these positions are for primary care physicians: family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics/gynecology. The balance is in a variety of sub-specialty areas such as neurosurgery, orthopedics, and ENT.

“The national shortage of physicians is starting to hit Wisconsin hard in rural and inner city areas,” according to Maureen Kartheiser, Director of the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health. “The number of openings we are seeing in hospitals and clinics has reached unprecedented levels. We are very concerned that some communities will not have access to the medical care they need if we continue to see openings outpace the number of physicians who are coming to Wisconsin.”

The prognosis for the physician workforce shortage is bleak as the population ages and requires more medical services. Close to 30 percent of the doctors now practicing in Wisconsin are approaching retirement, and it appears new physicians to replace them are slow in coming. Adding to the concern is the fact that recruitment efforts have been further hindered by the loss of the cap on awards associated with pain and suffering in cases involving medical liability. States without caps are viewed as less desirable places to practice by physicians because of their high insurance premiums. When more physicians are leaving a state than are coming in, it quickly turns into a medical access crisis for residents of that state.

Eric Borgerding, senior vice president of the Wisconsin Hospital Association, called the recently released statistics from the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health extremely “alarming” in light of the fact that Wisconsin has lost its previously favorable medical liability environment.

“In the best of times, it is not easy to recruit a physician, especially to inner city or rural locations in Wisconsin,” Borgerding noted. “But our favorable medical liability climate was one of the important advantages we could tout over many other states. With the cap gone, that key advantage is also lost.”

According to data from the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health Physician Placement Program, there are currently 320 openings: 166 specialist and 154 primary care physicians. In primary care alone the number of vacancies has grown from 112 in February 2003 to 156 in February 2006, a 39 percent increase in three years. Since 1979 not-for-profit physician recruitment services have been provided through the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, which is affiliated

with the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. It is one of the oldest and most successful physician placement services of its type in the nation.

“There are two things the Governor and Legislature can do right now to help address this situation,” Borgerding said. “First and foremost, they must restore a cap on non-economic damages in this legislative session. Waiting until 2007 is not an option. “

WHA also called on the Legislature and Governor to enact Assembly Bill 976 -- legislation authored by Rep. Jeffrey Mursau (R-Crivitz) that would create a loan forgiveness program for Wisconsin residents attending medical school in Wisconsin that agree to stay here and practice in a rural area upon graduation.

Maintaining a favorable medical liability environment and providing loan repayment for physicians locating in underserved areas were two key recommendations contained in a 2004 report, “Who Will Care for Our Patients,” issued jointly by the Wisconsin Hospital Association and the Wisconsin Medical Society.

END

NOTE: For physician vacancy numbers by region, see: <http://www.worh.org/index.asp>.
For more information on the medical liability issue, see: www.wha.org