

The National Health Service Corps: Serving Communities with Limited Access to Care

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) was created by public law 91-623 to enable health centers in rural and urban communities to compete with private medical practices and prevent a growing primary health care shortage. The law specified that the Corps would: “improve the delivery of health services to persons living in communities and areas of the United States where health personnel and services are inadequate.”¹

Since 1972, the NHSC has connected over 37,000 primary health care practitioners² to communities with limited access to primary care. Currently, more than 9,000 doctors, dentists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, behavioral health specialists, and other health practitioners³ are treating more than nine million people in the United States, regardless of their ability to pay. To support their service, the NHSC offers financial, networking and educational resources to support qualified health care practitioners who want to bring their skills where they are needed most.

Health Professional Shortage Areas: American Communities in Need of Health Workers

Communities with limited access to care designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), are defined regionally by population group or medical need. They can be urban or rural and are classified by a lack of primary care practitioners, dentists, and mental health specialists. All NHSC-approved sites are located in HPSAs, and currently, there are more than 12,000 sites. About one in five people in the U.S. (21 percent) lives in a primary care shortage area, which means they go without essential health services, or they have to travel long distances to see a primary health care practitioner.

National HPSA Statistics⁴:

- **Primary Care HPSAs: 6,422**
 - § Total U.S. medically underserved population: **38,617,172**
 - § Primary care practitioners *needed* to remove HPSA designation: **7,420**
- **Dental HPSAs: 4,670**
 - § Total U.S. underserved population: 33,933,896
 - § Dentists *needed* to remove HPSA designation: **7,219**
- **Mental Health HPSAs: 3,791**
 - § Total U.S. underserved population: **68,513,118**
 - § Mental health specialists *needed* to remove HPSA designation: **1,900**

Becoming a National Health Service Corps Member: Connecting Clinicians to Communities in Need

Practitioners must first apply for, and accept, a position at a NHSC-approved site, and then apply to the NHSC for loan repayment. Once accepted to the National Health Service Corps, the NHSC offers fully-trained and licensed health care practitioners an initial, tax-free loan repayment award of \$60,000 for two years of service. With additional years of service, loan repayment program participants may be able to pay off all their loans.

¹ <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about/NAC.pdf>

² <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about/facts.htm>

³ <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about/>

⁴ June 30, 2011: http://ersrs.hrsa.gov/ReportServer?/HGDW_Reports/BCD_HPSA/BCD_HPSA_SCR50_Qtr_Smry&rs:Format=HTML3.2

In addition to the NHSC Loan Repayment Program, the NHSC Scholarship Program pays students' tuition and cost of living while students train to become a primary care clinician in an NHSC-eligible discipline. To receive an NHSC scholarship, students must be enrolled in an accredited medical, dental, nurse practitioner, certified nurse midwife, or physician assistant training program. Upon graduation, NHSC Scholars serve as primary care practitioners in an NHSC-approved site of greatest need for two to four years, depending on their contract.

The Primary Care Shortage and Medical School Debt

According to the Association of American Medical Colleges' Center for Workforce Studies, there will be a shortage of 45,000 primary care physicians in the next decade.⁵ Part of the reason for this shortage is that primary care clinicians earn less than half of what the top two earning specialties make.⁶ Medical students may choose to enter the higher-paying specialties, rather than primary care when faced with their medical school loans. Seventy-eight percent of U.S. medical students have a student loan debt of \$100,000 or greater.⁷ In 2010, medical students graduated from public institutions with an average debt of \$148,222 and \$172,422 from private institutions.⁸

Expanding the National Health Service Corps

Strengthening and growing the primary care workforce is critical to reforming the nation's health care system. The NHSC is expanding to help meet the need for primary care practitioners and the communities they serve.

New funding of \$290 million from the Affordable Care Act (ACA) builds on a \$300 million investment in the NHSC in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Approximately 9,000 clinicians will be caring for more than nine million people by 2011, more than doubling the NHSC since 2008. More than 80 percent of NHSC members report they plan to stay at the site where they are currently working after their obligation is fulfilled.

Additional Information

To learn more about the NHSC and the dedicated public health care practitioners who provide service in all 50 states and territories, visit NHSC.hrsa.gov.

⁵ <http://www.aamc.org/newsroom/presskits/mdShortage1.pdf>

⁶ <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/300/10/1131>

⁷ <https://www.aamc.org/download/152968/data/10debtfactcard.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.aamc.org/download/152968/data/10debtfactcard.pdf>

