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Corps works to bring M.D.s to underserved

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Will work for loan forgiveness - a mantra for many newly minted M.D.s around the nation. The average graduate from the UI Carver College of Medicine bears an \$115,000 debt, says Linda Bissell, the director of financial services at the medical school.

But in order to lighten the financial baggage, they might have to work in areas where fellow physicians are sorely lacking.

Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, presented a bill June 28 reauthorizing the National Health Service Corps, a scholarship and loan-repayment program that implants primary-care professionals into clinician-deficient communities around the nation.

The bill also hikes the corps' annual budget to \$300 million - more than doubling its current funding - as part of the federal government's Health Center Initiative. Efforts go to provide health care to 1,200 disadvantaged communities around the country.

Such national programs send physicians to health centers that are typically established in urban areas with low-income populations, said Peter Damiano, a professor in the UI Public Policy Center.

The state has approximately 60 needy areas, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. But compared with inner city Chicago or even Davenport, smaller Iowa communities are at the back of the line in receiving help from such national programs, Damiano said.

The effects are notable in such areas as Black Hawk County.

"More health centers are being established, but the funding hasn't been adequate to reach rural America," said Jennifer Lightbody, the executive director of the People's Community Health Clinic in Waterloo. "We're not eligible for any [corps] providers."

The clinic last had a National Health Service Corps physician in 2001, she said. Meanwhile, it recruits doctors with a combination of federal and state incentive programs.

For the physicians, dentists, and psychiatrists who relocate to such needy areas, the transition

can be initially intimidating, Damiano said. He did dental work in the 1980s on a Navajo reservation.

"You come out of school not having seen anything like that before," he said.

Other concerns might include working in very specific medical fields.

"It locks [students] somewhat into disciplines before they're exposed to all different kinds," Bissell said.

Commonly needed services include gynecology, family practice, and general internal medicine, Lightbody said.

"It's a mixed picture," she said. "Some fulfill their loan obligation and are still working here 10 to 15 years later."

Currently, no one from the Carver College of Medicine, College of Dentistry, or College of Pharmacy is enrolled in the program.

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