

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI

Sponsor Statement: Senate Bill 18

The intent of Senate Bill 18 is to help ensure that Alaska has an adequate supply of doctors to meet the health care needs of its citizens. It would expand the number of Alaskan students able to receive medical training through the WWAMI program each year from 20 to 24. This is the maximum number that the University of Alaska can accommodate within its existing facilities and with its current faculty. Expansion of this program over time to train 30 Alaskan students annually is one of the primary recommendations of the Alaska Physician Supply Task Force.

This task force was established to address the severe shortage of doctors in Alaska. In its 2006 report, the task force found that Alaska has 375 fewer doctors than needed and the 17th lowest physician-to-population ratio in the nation. This shortage is undermining Alaskans' access to health care and increasing costs throughout the state. Seniors are having particular difficulty finding primary care physicians, causing many to forego treatment or face dangerously long wait times. Internal medicine specialists and psychiatrists are in especially short supply as are doctors of all types in rural Alaska.

This shortage is expected to worsen as Alaska's population increases and ages. The task force reported that over the next 20 years, nearly twice as many practicing physicians will be needed – about 1,100 more than the current 1,347 in patient care – to meet demand as the state's senior population triples. To complicate matters, one-third of our existing physicians are expected to retire in the next 10-15 years.

Additionally, Alaska is far behind other states in the production of doctors. Alaska is one of six states without an independent in-state medical school. The state's primary vehicle for training doctors is the regional WWAMI program. In 2007, the legislature expanded the number of Alaska-funded seats in the program from 10 to 20. This bill continues the incremental expansion of the program as it has been shown to be an effective means of recruiting doctors to the state. Fifty percent of Alaskans who enter WWAMI end up practicing in Alaska. The percentage increases to 80% when graduates from other WWAMI states are counted as returned.

As the national supply of physicians shrinks, recruitment of doctors to Alaska will become ever more competitive. Expanding the number of Alaskans trained through WWAMI is one effective step the state can take to ensure that all Alaskans have access to needed health care.