

Group advocates incentives to lure health care workers**SHORTAGE: Problem is especially acute in alaska's rural areas, planner says.**By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA
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Armed with reports of continued shortages of doctors and other health care workers in Alaska, a group of health care organizations is pushing for the state to begin offering doctors, dentists, nurses and others money to come practice in Alaska.

Shelley Hughes of the Alaska Primary Care Association, one of the backers of financial incentives for health care workers, led a workshop to talk about the idea Monday at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

Her group represented 142 community health clinics -- nonprofits that offer health care on a sliding scale to anyone. Their turnover of doctors, physician assistants and nurse practitioners is about one-third every year, Hughes said.

Statewide, the number of doctors with active licenses in Alaska increased by 2 percent from 2007 to 2009 -- barely keeping up with population growth, and not keeping up with the health care needs of Alaska's growing number of senior citizens, said Alice Rarig, a planner with the state Department of Health and Social Services.

Rarig said the problem is especially acute in some rural areas and for primary care doctors. For example, in Anchorage and Mat-Su, there's a doctor for every 352 people, but in northern and Southwest Alaska, the ratio is closer to one doctor for more than 950 people.

Alaska has a pretty good supply of specialists in urban areas but not enough internists -- primary care doctors -- and psychiatrists, she said.

The Primary Care Association, Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, Alaska State Medical Association, Alaska Native Health Board, AARP-Alaska and numerous other groups are supporting SB 139, a bill in the Legislature that calls for the state to spend \$7.9 million over the next three years on drawing people to work in medical professions in Alaska.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Donny Olson of Nome, has been approved by one committee and now sits in the Senate Finance Committee.

Under the bill, the state would repay student loans over a three-year period for health care professionals recently out of school. It would give direct payments to already-established health care workers in exchange for their practicing in Alaska, also over three years.

The \$7.9 million would cover at least 90 positions, with payments ranging from \$20,000 to \$27,000 per year for those in jobs such as nurse practitioner, physician assistant and physical therapist, and \$35,000 to \$47,000 annually for doctors, dentists and pharmacists, said Hughes.

People who took especially hard-to-fill positions, such as in remote areas, would get the highest

payments.

Robert Sewell, a state health program manager, said repaying loans for newly trained doctors and other health workers, and offering direct payments to those with more experience, is the fastest way to make a dent in the need for more medical workers.

It yields much faster results, for example, than giving scholarships to people while they are still training for medical professions, he said.

Many states already offer some sort of financial incentive to attract doctors.

"This is not weird science," said Sewell. "The fact that Alaska is considering this now means only we are Johnny-come-latelies."

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