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Upstate, rural health care in serious need of help

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We are facing a serious challenge to renew and rebuild the health care workforce in our region. One reason: Many doctors choose to practice in larger Downstate cities - not the smaller towns where they grew up.

In the past few weeks, I have been to the North Country, Utica, Cortland, Binghamton, Johnson City, Ithaca, Hamilton, Rushville, Canandaigua and Watkins Glen - and these communities are worried. They are worried about how they can care for their aging, their neighbors, their family members who face diabetes, cancer, heart disease . . . themselves.

They are worried about how to attract or retain any industry or small business where there is a dearth of care. In addition, the physician workforce is "aging out." The Center for Workforce Studies at the University of Albany reports that more than one-third of doctors in our state are over 55. In several areas of Central New York, the North Country and the Southern Tier, that number tops 40 percent.

Small towns will have a hard time replacing those physicians who will retire soon. The state's rural counties already have half as many physicians per capita as urban ones. And too many of the doctors now in training are not choosing the most needed specialties. Primary care physicians, general surgeons and obstetricians are in high demand.

Registered and advanced practice nurses, respiratory and physical therapists, radiology technologists and radiation therapists are just as scarce and as valuable.

At SUNY Upstate Medical University, we hear those calls for help. It is not only our name - but also our service area - that is truly "Upstate." We serve one-third of the state, geographically, and we are the only academic health center that carries a mandate to provide a regional strategy. The need is urgent, and we are responding.

Our plan includes:

Ö We will work with communities in the North Country, Southern Tier and Mohawk Valley to bring our special training to their communities, as we believe the best care is delivered by well-trained clinicians close to home.

Ö We will build on the success that is our Binghamton campus. Currently, 80 of our third- and fourth-year medical students gain clinical experience there. We also plan to offer a physician assistant program on site in 2009.

Ö We will be looking to develop a branch campus in the North Country to address local

needs and to supplement the fine foundation laid there by the region's hospitals and Fort Drum.

Ö We are adding new programs that meet the regional needs. In addition to our PA program, we are planning a certified registered nurse anesthetist program, a nurse practitioner program in family mental health, and with our neighbor, Syracuse University, we will offer a master's in public health.

Ö We are renewing our efforts to attract highly qualified applicants from underserved communities who are likely to return to those communities. With all factors equal, it makes eminent sense to admit the student from the Mohawk Valley instead of the Silicon Valley; from Philadelphia, N.Y. instead of PA.

We face a huge challenge, and SUNY Upstate's regional approach to strengthen health care can and must work. It will need fresh investments from the federal and state government, and we are grateful for the welcome our plans have received from elected officials.

It will also call for private investment and commitment from our communities. And it will take resolve from each of us who share this common fact: we will all be patients one day.

Please join us on the journey as we create education and outreach for the next generation of health-care professionals.

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