

4/07/2004 Brownback, Moran Introduce Legislation to Bring Physicians to Kansas Communities

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Legislation Reauthorizes Physician Recruitment Program

WASHINGTON D.C. - Senator Sam Brownback and Congressman Jerry Moran recently introduced legislation to reauthorize a program to recruit physicians to serve in rural areas. The J-1 visa waiver program, set to expire on June 1, 2004, allows foreign-born, U.S.-educated physicians to practice in rural areas that have a shortage of physicians and specialty doctors.

"For many areas across our country, this program is the only way that rural hospitals can get qualified physicians to serve in their communities," Moran said. "By retaining this program, hospitals and clinics are allowed to hire physicians, who have studied and trained in medical schools throughout the United States, to practice in areas that might not otherwise have a doctor."

The J-1 visa program gives international medical graduates the opportunity to stay in the U.S. if they agree to practice in areas that are experiencing a shortage of doctors. For many rural Kansas hospitals and clinics, this program is the only way to get an experienced doctor to serve their patients. Since 1993, 115 foreign doctors have served in Kansas communities through this program, and 67 physicians, or 58 percent, have remained in practice in the state following the completion of their three-year service obligation.

Under the program, states are able to apply for up to 30 doctors per year. Kansas allows visa waivers for 15 primary care physicians and 15 specialists. Primary care physicians include general medicine, internal medicine, family practice, general pediatrics, obstetrics/gynecology, emergency medicine and psychiatry.

Now with the support of Senators Sam Brownback and Kent Conrad (D-ND), Congressman Moran has drafted legislation to allow states to decide where doctors are needed, giving states more flexibility in filling their own health care needs. This legislation would provide for a five-year reauthorization of the program.

"Congress is taking action to improve access to health care for rural Americans by allowing good doctors, who are educated in the United States, to practice medicine in rural areas," Brownback said. "This is a common sense solution to a growing problem in Kansas and throughout the country."

"It is difficult to get physicians in a small rural area," said Deanna Freeman, Administrator of the Jewell County Hospital. "The J-1 Visa Waiver program is very important to small rural hospitals in order to continue providing quality health care to the community. Jewell County Hospital was successful in recruiting and hiring two J-1 physicians in 2002."

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