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IFB program supports rural doctor recruitment

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Illinois Farm Bureau’s partnership with the Illinois State Medical Society and two University of Illinois rural medical programs helps keep a supply of physicians in the pipeline to rural Illinois communities.

Since 1948, the Illinois Farm Bureau, jointly with the Illinois State Medical Society, has provided loans to medical students with the intent of building a bank of doctors in rural communities across Illinois. Known by its acronym RIMSAP, the Rural Illinois Medical Student Assistance Program has issued $815,000 in loan money since 2009. Two years ago, the board made those loans interest-free and increased the cap to $50,000 per student.

As part of their agreement with RIMSAP, participating students must apply to the University of Illinois College of Medicine’s Rural Medical Education Program (RMED) at its Rockford campus or the Rural Student Physician Program (RSPP) at its Peoria campus. While the educational programs offer different experiences over varying lengths of time, both teach aspects unique to rural medicine and intend to supply Illinois’ rural areas with quality doctors of varied disciplines.

Likewise, both university programs have expressed the value of IFB’s RIMSAP efforts to their successes.

“RIMSAP and RMED have been excellent partners throughout the history of our program, with RIMSAP providing the financial support and us the rural medical education,” said Mark Meurer, recruiter for the RMED Program at the University of Illinois-Rockford. “RIMSAP students who participate in the RMED Program have a high rate of retention in rural communities. The combination of the two really does work.”

RMED celebrates a nearly 75% placement of graduates in rural areas, ranking it as one of the most successful rural medical programs in the United States, Meurer said. The program now approaches 300 actively practicing physicians in rural areas since its establishment in 1993.

“The key to what we do is we solely recruit students with rural backgrounds,” said Meurer, a fifth-generation Lee County farmer. “We travel the state of Illinois recruiting and looking for students who come from farms, small towns and rural communities across the state of Illinois because we know those students tend to go back and practice in rural communities at a much higher rate than those who don’t come from a rural community.”

RMED’s rural-focused curriculum teaches aspects unique to medicine in rural areas. Students experience farm accident simulation training, conduct research projects in rural settings and complete clinicals within a network of 30 collaborating rural hospitals in the state. The program also takes the team health care approach literally, teaching rural medical students alongside rural pharmacy students, rural-focused advanced practice nursing students and rural-focused social work students, Meurer said.

Similarly, RSPP at the University of Illinois’ Peoria campus focuses on recruitment of students with rural backgrounds, but also encourages those with urban upbringings to consider rural practice. Program Director Dr. James Barnett cites an example of an RSPP student who grew up in San Diego, but after her rural clinical experience, now practices in rural Illinois, as do about 50% of the program’s graduates.

RSPP gives third-year medical students in Peoria an option to perform clinical work in rural areas as they enter their primary year of clinical experience. Known as a longitudinal integrated clerkship, the program takes an apprenticeship approach with significant one-on-one learning from multiple mentors of different disciplines in one location across seven months. This allows students to immerse themselves in a single rural medical environment, maintain a continuous relationship with multiple physician mentors and monitor patient treatment progress across several appointments.

“About 20% of the population is rural, but only 10% of the doctors are there,” Barnett said. “We anticipate a significant loss of doctors through retirement soon and not enough replacements. One of the best ways of recruiting is actually through training in and discovering the joy of practicing in a rural setting.”

To learn more about RIMSAP, visit {rimsap.com}, or contact Donna Gallivan at Illinois Farm Bureau – 309-557-2350 or dgallivan@ilfb.org.

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