



Inclusion of Primary Eye Care Services in the National Health Service Corps

Introduction

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) is charged with improving the health of our Nation's rural underserved communities by providing access to care for millions of Americans who might otherwise be forced to do without. As part of this mission, the NHSC student loan repayment program helps bring together dedicated, well-educated health care providers with rural communities who need their services. The NHSC program provides financial support specifically aimed at easing the debt burden associated with a professional education, and allows carefully selected clinicians—including primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, dentists, mental and behavioral health professionals, physician assistants, certified nurse-midwives and dental hygienists to undertake an extraordinary multi-year commitment to safeguarding the public's health in rural America. *Since the NHSC student loan repayment program was restructured in 2002, it has been made far less effective in serving the primary eye care needs of rural Americans with the exclusion of doctors of optometry.*

The exclusion of optometrists from the NHSC student loan program has resulted in severely restricted access to primary eye care services. Today, only about 17% of community health centers have an optometrist on staff. The vast majority of communities go without the necessary care. This lack of service results in severely restricting rural Americans of all ages access to primary eye care services, including comprehensive eye exams, detecting and diagnosing eye diseases like glaucoma, cataracts, diabetes related eye conditions, and other retinal disorders, eye infections; treatment of eye diseases and injuries; and evaluating and treating presbyopia, myopia, hyperopia and other common vision system disorders.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees recognize the need for expanded primary eye and vision care and specifically call for the inclusion of optometrists in the NHSC student loan repay program. The National Rural Health Association strongly supported this directive, along with the National Association of Community Health Centers, Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry and the American Optometric Student Association.

Conclusion

In order to make primary eye care more accessible in underserved areas across the country, reinstatement of optometrists in the NHSC student loan repayment program will help bring qualified eye doctors to the rural areas where they are needed.

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