

Primary Health Care Practitioners Program Annual Report 2022

**Pennsylvania Primary
Care Office**

November 2022



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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Executive Summary

Act 113 of 1992 established the Primary Health Care Practitioners Program within the Pennsylvania Department of Health (Department). The program is administered by the Pennsylvania Primary Care Office (PCO, which was formerly known as the Bureau of Health Planning, Division of Health Professions Development).

The goals of the Primary Health Care Practitioner Program are:

- ❖ identify areas in Pennsylvania lacking primary health care practitioners;
- ❖ operate programs to attract primary care providers to medically underserved areas;
- ❖ expand and improve health care access and services in underserved communities; and
- ❖ promote the training and development of future health care providers interested in practicing in underserved areas.

The PCO accomplishes these goals through the following activities:

- ❖ updating key availability information on primary care physicians, psychiatrists, and general dentists;
- ❖ developing applications to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration for designation of Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), Medically Underserved Areas (MUAs), and Medically Underserved Populations (MUPs);
- ❖ operating the Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program (LRP) to assist primary care providers, working in approved locations, to repay student loans;
- ❖ assisting physicians on immigrant educational visas to obtain a waiver to a two-year home residence requirement and enabling them to begin practicing in underserved areas; and
- ❖ managing the Community-based Health Care Grant Program to provide funding to community-based organizations to increase access to care. The details and results of this program are described in a separate, legislatively required [report](#).

In addition, the PCO partners with the following organizations through grant agreements:

- ❖ Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers to operate the Primary Care Career Center;
- ❖ Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health to provide technical assistance on rural health issues to state government and other organizations interested in improving access to care in rural areas;
- ❖ Area Health Education Centers to provide clinical rotations to medical students and medical residents to broaden their knowledge of various underserved communities;
- ❖ Bridging the Gaps project, managed by the University of Pennsylvania, to provide

students in medical and social programs experience in service to disadvantaged populations; and

- ❖ Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians to support nine residency slots for students preparing for service as primary care physicians.

The following are key measures during this reporting period, SFY 2021-2022 :

- ❖ 23 HPSA applications submitted for federal approval;
- ❖ 114 practitioners in the primary care loan repayment program;
- ❖ 124 physicians participated in the visa waiver programs;
- ❖ 16 community-based health care grants;
- ❖ nine family residency slots supported;
- ❖ 254 students in health care fields participated in community-based rotations;
- ❖ 201 currently approved National Health Service Corps sites; and
- ❖ 149 students participated in a health-related summer internship representing 66 communities.

Methods

Updating Provider Information for Shortage Designation

A key component to an analysis of an area for possible designation as a HPSA or MUA is updating the information related to the availability of primary care providers. To accomplish this task, the PCO collaborates with the Pennsylvania Department of State to administer surveys when physicians and dentists renew their licenses to practice in Pennsylvania. The PCO extracts the answers from a subset to the survey questions to update provider information in the software used for shortage designation analysis. The information to update includes office hours at each practice location; percent of patients paying with Medicaid; and the percent of patients using a sliding fee scale to pay for services. These data elements are used to determine the full-time equivalents available to provide services to a particular population.

In addition to using licensure surveys, the PCO is exploring an analysis of Medicaid claims to estimate the availability of providers to low-income patients. Furthermore, if community health care organizations have knowledge of local providers, the PCO will collaborate with the community health care organization to update relevant provider information.

HPSA or MUA/P Applications

Using the most up-to-date provider information, the PCO can analyze an area for potential federal designation as a HPSA or MUA/P, using shortage designation software. The software combines the provider information with other factors, such as socio-economic, demographic, and health indicators, to determine if an area under consideration initially meets criteria for designation. If so, the PCO will apply to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration for formal designation. Providers in

designated areas may qualify for several federal and state programs which are used for the recruitment and retention of providers in medically underserved areas.

Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program

A request for applications is issued annually to solicit applications from primary care providers for potential participation in the LRP. Practitioners in the primary care disciplines listed below are eligible to apply.

Table 1. Disciplines Eligible for the Primary Care Loan Repayment Program

DISCIPLINE	SPECIALTY
Physicians <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDs • DOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Medicine • General Internal Medicine • General Pediatrics • Obstetrics/Gynecology • Geriatrics • Psychiatry
Physician Assistants - Certified Certified Registered Nurse Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Health • Family Health • Pediatrics • Women’s Health • Geriatrics • Psychiatric-Mental Health
Certified Nurse-Midwives	N/A
Dentists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Dentistry • Pediatric Dentistry
Registered Dental Hygienists Public Health Dental Hygiene Practitioners	N/A
Psychologists Licensed Clinical Social Workers Licensed Professional Counselors Marriage and Family Therapists	N/A

In addition to working in one of these disciplines, an applicant must work at an approved practice site. To be approved, a site must provide comprehensive outpatient primary and preventive medical, dental, or behavioral and mental health services to populations residing in HPSAs or the site must serve a minimum of 30 percent low-income patients.

All applications to the LRP are scored by combining characteristics of each applicant with features of the sites at which they work. The scores for the applicants are ranked and grant awards are made to the highest scoring applications in each of three categories: primary care, dental, and mental health. Physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists and dentists may qualify for up to \$80,000 in student loan repayment assistance. Practitioners in other qualifying disciplines may qualify for up to \$48,000 in assistance.

Physician Visa Waiver Programs

The PCO operates three programs to assist foreign-born physicians to obtain a waiver of certain visa requirements in exchange for service in approved areas.

Conrad 30 J-1 Visa Waiver

An international medical graduate who is in the United States on a J-1 visa is required to return to their home country for two years upon completion of their training before returning to the United States. The Conrad 30 program allows international medical graduates to apply for a waiver of the two-year foreign residence requirement. In return, the physician must practice for three years in an approved underserved area in Pennsylvania. The program focuses on primary care providers; however, specialists may apply and will be considered on an as needed basis.

To apply for this program, a sponsoring employer will work through an immigration attorney to compile an application and submit it to the Department. If supported by the Department, the application is submitted to the US Department of State who reviews each application prior to submission to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The USCIS will make the final determination to grant the waiver. As the name implies, each state is limited to 30 slots, regardless of the size of the state.

Appalachian Regional Commission J-1 Visa Waiver

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) program also permits international medical graduates, who hold a J-1 visa, to apply for a waiver of their two-year residence requirement. In return, the physician must practice in an approved location for three years. Practice sites must be in a HPSA, within one of the counties identified by the ARC.

To apply for this program, a sponsoring employer will engage an immigration attorney to submit an application to the Department. If supported by the Department, an application is sent to the ARC, who reviews the application and makes a recommendation to the US Department of State. Unlike the Conrad 30 program, the ARC does not limit the number of slots per state.

National Interest Waiver

This program allows foreign physicians with exceptional ability and advanced degrees to request a waiver of the job offer and labor certification requirement as administered by the US Department of Labor. A letter of attestation from a federal agency or state health department is needed in support of the physician requesting

a National Interest Waiver (NIW). This program is one path to achieving permanent residence.

An employer wishing to sponsor a physician for an NIW will submit information about the physician and practice site to the Department. The physician must agree to work full-time in a clinical practice located in a HPSA, MUA, or MUP for a period of five years. After review by the Department, an approved application is submitted to the US Department of State.

Budget Allocation

The following table contains the allocation of the Primary Care Practitioner appropriation for the 2020-21 state fiscal year.

Table 2. Primary Care Practitioner Budget, SFY 2021-22

Program	State Budget	Federal Budget
Primary Care Loan Repayment Grant Awards	\$2,151,000	\$1,000,000
Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians Residency Program	\$1,058,000	
Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers – Primary Care Career Center	\$175,000	
Penn State University College of Medicine - Area Health Education Centers	\$615,000	
Penn State University - Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health	\$100,000	
University of Pennsylvania - Bridging the Gaps Program	\$300,000	
Operational Expenses	\$151,000	
Total	\$4,550,000	\$1,000,000

Findings

Shortage Designation

Statewide Rational Service Area Plan

The PCO has been collaborating with the Department of Health Information Technology team to develop a Statewide Rational Service Area (SRSA) Plan. The

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) mandated that all PCOs, nationwide, create rational service areas for their states based on factors that could include income, ethnicity, travel patterns, or other significant data. HRSA is expected to release guidance early in 2023 which will provide the program with further direction on creating SRSAs. The SRSA Plan was originally due on March 31, 2023. However, the due date has been delayed until March 31, 2024, to accommodate a new requirement for Maternal Care Targeted Area (MCTA) provider updates.

Maternal Care Targeted Areas

HRSA has recently introduced an addition to the HPSA program. A MCTA is a designation within an already existing Primary Care HPSA designation. MCTAs indicate a shortage of maternal care within areas that already experience a shortage of providers and will target funding to offer loan repayment for Obstetricians/Gynecologists and Certified Nurse Midwives to provide services within these targeted areas. HRSA has charged the PCOs with updating data regarding the availability of Obstetricians/Gynecologists and Certified Nurse Midwives to enable MCTA designation scores to become available in November 2022.

National Health Service Corps

The federal National Health Service Corps (NHSC) also operates programs to recruit and retain health care providers in underserved areas. To qualify for NHSC programs, a practitioner must work at an approved practice site. The PCO has a process in place to assist prospective new NHSC practice sites and sites targeted for recertification to assure compliance with current NHSC programmatic requirements before a recommendation is submitted for NHSC review. This work includes providing technical assistance to applicants regarding the requirements of obtaining certification or recertification. During the reporting period, 24 NHSC site certifications and two recertification applications were submitted by the PCO. According to the October 2022 Field Strength Report from the NHSC, there were 201 NHSC sites and 385 participants in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program

The following table summarizes the applications to the LRP during the 2021-22 state fiscal year. Each grant awardee had a two-year period of obligation. Limited funding prevented awarding grants to all eligible applicants.

Table 3. LRP Applications, SFY 2021-22

	Applications Received	Applicants Deemed Ineligible	Grant Awards
Primary Medical	104	8	25
Dental	31	2	12
Mental Health	64	18	13
Total	199	28	50

Combining these grantees with those providing their second year of service, 114 primary care practitioners were obligated to practice in medically underserved areas of Pennsylvania during this reporting period.

Physician Visa Waiver Programs

During the 2021-22 state fiscal year, the PCO supported 30 J-1 visa waiver applications, seven ARC waivers, and no NIW applications. Combining these providers with participants already in the program, the commonwealth had 124 physicians practicing in underserved areas because of the visa waiver programs.

Community-based Health Care Grant Program

Sixteen grantees participated in the Community-based Health Care Grant Program during the 2021-22 state fiscal year. Of the 16 grantees, 11 were federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) or FQHC look-alikes, three were hospital health clinics, and two were free clinics. Grantees reported a total of 57,220 new patients and 237,246 low-income patient visits during the 2021-22 state fiscal year. More detailed results of this program are in a separate, legislatively required [report](#). A summary of the number of community-based health care grants, visa waiver physicians, and loan repayment participants by county is presented in Appendix 1.

Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians Residency Program

The PCO has continued to provide annual state grant funding to the Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians to increase family practice residency positions in Pennsylvania residency programs located in or serving rural and underserved communities. State funding has been provided to support nine residency positions in this program. Two slots are located at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Altoona; two at Excelsa Health in Latrobe; three at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and two at Forbes Allegheny Health Network hospital in Monroeville.

Pennsylvania Primary Care Career Center

The Pennsylvania Primary Care Career Center, a collaborative partnership between the Department and the Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers, provides recruitment services and support to community health centers, rural health clinics, critical access hospitals and other safety-net facilities across the state to facilitate the recruitment and retention of physicians and other clinical, administrative, and ancillary staff. The Career Center also builds and maintains relationships and partners with various agencies and schools with the goal of addressing the primary care shortage in Pennsylvania.

Between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022, the Career Center placed 19 candidates. The Career Center currently has 305 jobs posted, 13,717 candidates in their database, and about 150 candidates in active recruitment. Two career fairs were held in the fall of 2021,

with both a virtual and in-person option. A total of 48 candidates attended these career fairs. A new website was developed during the first half of 2022 and was launched in September 2022. It can be viewed at www.paprimarycarecareers.org. The Career Center was part of a planning group for a Rural Recruitment Summit on April 20, 2022, that was attended by 80 administrators, clinicians, and others from rural areas. US Representative Glenn Thompson addressed the summit.

Penn State University College of Medicine - Area Health Education Centers

During the last state fiscal year, 254 clinical rotations for medical, physician assistant, and nurse practitioner students were completed. Of this total, 172 of the rotations were in underserved or safety net sites.

Penn State University – Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

During the 2021-22 state fiscal year, the Office of Rural Health staff served on 45 committees, boards, and task forces at the local, state, and national levels to advocate for the health care needs of rural residents and promote initiatives that address access to quality health care services in rural areas. The Office of Rural Health organized conferences and summits on grant writing, rural human trafficking, health care transformation, primary care recruitment and retention, and community and public health targeted to organizations providing health care in rural areas. During the 2021-22 state fiscal year, 996 types of technical assistance were provided to 2,930 individual clients, representing 273 hospitals, clinics, agencies, organizations, and others.

University of Pennsylvania - Bridging the Gaps Program

The Bridging the Gaps Community Health Internship Program is another project partially funded through a state grant. During the reporting period, approximately 149 students participated in a seven-week summer internship program that coordinated the training of health and social service students with the provision of health-related services to underserved communities. The 149 students represented 66 sites in rural and urban communities across Pennsylvania.

Challenges and Recommendations

The PCO succeeded in placing health care practitioners in underserved locations and expanding access to care. Nevertheless, we have experienced some challenges.

Primary Care Loan Repayment

Although we are using the maximum federal funds available for the LRP, we consistently receive more eligible applications than funding available to provide each eligible applicant with a grant award. For example, in the 2021-22 state fiscal year, only about 30 percent of eligible applicants received an award.

Recommendation: The enacted budget for SFY 2022-23 included increased funding the primary health care practitioner program from \$4.55 million to \$7.05 million. Of that total, the PCO was directed to allocate \$3.451 million to the loan repayment program, and as a result, we will be providing approximately 30 more grant awards than in SFY 2021-22. We recommend maintaining this enhanced level of funding to continue supporting a larger number of grant awards

Conrad 30 J-1 Visa Waiver Program

The federal statute governing this program placed a limit of 30 visa waiver slots per state regardless of the size of each state. We usually receive more than 30 applications each year.

Recommendation: Representatives from Pennsylvania could advocate to Congress for an increase in the limit of slots per state.

Shortage Designation

As stated earlier in this report, one of the key components in the analysis of areas for possible shortage designation is gathering accurate information regarding the availability of primary care providers. Although the use of voluntary licensure surveys has increased our capabilities to compile these statistics, further development of our data gathering resources would produce even more accurate information.

Recommendation: Consider options to encourage primary care providers to complete the entirety of the survey as part of the license renewal process. In addition, the PCO is continuing to pursue the use of Medicaid claims to verify the availability of practitioners delivering services to low-income people.

**Appendix 1
Community-based Health Care Grants, Visa Waiver Physicians, and Loan
Repayment Participants by County, SFY 2021-22.**

			Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			CBHC Grantees	Visa Waiver Physicians	Primary Medical Care
Adams					
Allegheny		15	2	1	3
Armstrong		1	1		2
Beaver			2		
Bedford		1	1		
Berks	2	1	3	1	1
Blair		8			1
Bradford		5			
Bucks					
Butler		1			
Cambria	1	2	1		
Cameron		1			1
Carbon					
Centre	1	1	1		
Chester	1				
Clarion		1	2		1
Clearfield		1	1		
Clinton					
Columbia					
Crawford		4			3
Cumberland					
Dauphin		3	3	1	
Delaware		1	1		
Elk		1	1		1
Erie		10	3		4
Fayette		6			1
Forest					
Franklin		5	5	1	1
Fulton					
Greene					1
Huntingdon			3		2
Indiana					

			Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			Primary Medical Care	Dental	Mental Health
	CBHC Grantees	Visa Waiver Physicians			
Jefferson					
Juniata		3			
Lackawanna	1	6	2	1	1
Lancaster	2		3	1	
Lawrence		5	1		
Lebanon					
Lehigh			1		2
Luzerne		1			
Lycoming			3		
McKean		3	1		
Mercer		1			
Mifflin				1	1
Monroe					
Montgomery	1		2		
Montour					
Northampton		1	2		
Northumberland		4			
Perry					
Philadelphia	2	11	5	13	3
Pike					
Potter		4			
Schuylkill	1		1	1	1
Snyder					
Somerset		5			
Sullivan					
Susquehanna					
Tioga					
Union					
Venango		4	1	1	1
Warren		2	1		
Washington	1		3	1	
Wayne	2	2	1	2	
Westmoreland		4			
Wyoming					
York	1		1		
Totals	16	124	58	25	31