

Primary Health Care Practitioners Program Annual Report 2024

**Pennsylvania Primary
Care Office**

January 2025



**Pennsylvania
Department of Health**

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Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Name
3RNET	Rural Recruitment and Retention Network
ARC	Appalachian Regional Commission
Department	Pennsylvania Department of Health
FQHC	Federally Qualified Health Center
HPSA	Health Professional Shortage Area
HRSA	Health Resources and Services Administration
LRP	Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program
MCTA	Maternal Care Target Area
MUA	Medically Underserved Area
MUP	Medically Underserved Population
NHSC	National Health Services Corps
NIW	National Interest Waiver
PCO	Primary Care Office in the Department of Health
SRSA	Statewide Rational Service Area
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

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 Department's Primary Care Office (PCO).

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 by:

- ❖ Updating key availability information on primary care physicians, psychiatrists, and general dentists;
- ❖ Developing applications to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) 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 the 2023-24 state fiscal year:

- ❖ 57 HPSA applications submitted for federal approval; 55 of the 57 were approved;
- ❖ 155 practitioners funded through the primary care loan repayment program;
- ❖ 155 physicians participated in the visa waiver programs;
- ❖ 15 community-based health care grants;
- ❖ Nine family residency slots supported;
- ❖ 332 clinical rotations for medical, physician assistant, and nurse practitioner students were completed;
- ❖ 486 currently approved National Health Service Corps (NHSC) sites; and
- ❖ 121 students participated in a health-related summer internship representing 63 communities.

Methods

Updating Provider Information for Shortage Designation

A key component for potential designation as a HPSA or MUA is to update 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 to update provider information in the software used for shortage designation analysis, including 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 continuing to develop a method to use Medicaid claims to estimate the availability of providers to low-income patients when practitioners do not complete the question on the percent of their patients paying with Medicaid. We expect to start using Medicaid claims for these cases in 2025. 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 analyzes 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 applies to HRSA for formal designation. This process is important because providers in designated areas may qualify for several federal and state programs which are used to recruit and retain providers in medically underserved locations.

National Health Service Corps

The NHSC 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 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, including providing technical assistance to applicants.

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 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	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 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 receive 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 works 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 which reviews each application prior to submission to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The USCIS makes 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 engages an immigration attorney to submit an application to the Department. If supported by the

Department, an application is sent to the ARC, which 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 submits 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. An application which is reviewed and supported by the Department is submitted to the US Department of State to begin the federal approval process.

Budget Allocation

The following table contains the allocation of the Primary Care Practitioner appropriation for the 2023-24 state fiscal year.

Table 2. Primary Care Practitioner Budget, SFY 2023-24

Program	State Budget	Federal Budget
Primary Care Loan Repayment Grant Awards	\$3,451,000	\$900,000
Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians Residency Program	\$2,800,000	
Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers – Primary Care Career Center	\$257,059	
Penn State University College of Medicine - Area Health Education Centers	\$903,378	
Penn State University - Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health	\$146,891	
University of Pennsylvania - Bridging the Gaps Program	\$440,672	
Operational Expenses	\$351,000	\$100,000
Total	\$8,350,000	\$1,000,000

Program Results

Shortage Designation

Statewide Rational Service Area Plan

The PCO has been collaborating with a consultant to develop a Statewide Rational Service Area (SRSA) Plan. 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. The SRSA Plan was submitted to HRSA before the deadline in March 2024. The plan was approved by HRSA and is expected to be used for new HPSA applications in 2025.

Maternal Care Targeted Areas (MCTAs)

HRSA 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. The MCTA designation will direct funding to offer loan repayment for obstetricians, gynecologists, and certified nurse midwives to provide services within these targeted areas.

HRSA has tentatively planned an update of MCTA scores in September 2025. To prepare for this event, HRSA has directed the PCOs nationwide to update data related to the availability of obstetricians, gynecologists, and certified nurse midwives. Therefore, the Pennsylvania PCO has been and will continue to be involved in this activity to prepare for the expected national MCTA update.

National Health Service Corps

During the reporting period, 55 NHSC site certifications and 69 recertification applications were submitted by the PCO. Combining these results with sites not requiring recertification during the reporting period, Pennsylvania had 486 sites approved for participation in NHSC programs, according to the October 2024 Field Strength Report. Furthermore, that report stated 212 practitioners from Pennsylvania were participating in the NHSC programs at 131 practice sites.

Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program

The following table summarizes the applications to the LRP during the 2023-24 state fiscal year.

Table 3. LRP Applications, SFY 2023-24

	Applications Received	Applicants Not Awarded	Grants Awarded
Primary Medical	83	46	37
Dental	25	6	19
Mental Health	37	21	16
Total	145	73	72

Combining these grantees with those providing their second year of service, the Commonwealth had 155 primary care practitioners supported by the LRP practicing in underserved areas Pennsylvania during this reporting period.

Physician Visa Waiver Programs

During the 2023-24 state fiscal year, the PCO supported 30 J-1 visa waiver applications, six ARC waivers, and six NIW applications. Combining these providers with participants already in the program, the Commonwealth had 155 physicians practicing in underserved areas because of the visa waiver programs.

Community-based Health Care Grant Program

Fifteen grantees participated in the Community-based Health Care Grant Program during the 2023-24 state fiscal year. Of the 15 grantees, 12 were FQHCs or FQHC look-alikes, two were free clinics, and one was a nurse-managed health clinic. Grantees reported a total of 7,558 new patients and 24,010 low-income patient visits during the 2023-24 state fiscal year. More detailed results of this program are in the Community Based Health Care annual [report](#). A summary of the number of community-based health care grants, physicians supported through the visa waiver programs, and loan repayment participants by county is presented in Appendix 1.

Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians Residency Program

The PCO continued to provide annual state grant funding to the Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians to increase family medicine residency positions in Pennsylvania residency programs located in or serving rural and underserved communities. State funding was provided to support nine residency positions: two positions 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 Allegheny Health Network Forbes 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, 2023, and June 30, 2024, 452 candidates indicating an interest in working in Pennsylvania registered with the Rural Recruitment and Retention Network (3RNET), which had 194 job openings across the state posted. More than 230 candidate referrals were made by either the Career Center or health professionals, and the Career Center placed nine candidates. 3RNET also includes an automatic referral

feature, which sent over 25,000 candidate referrals during the 2023-2024 fiscal year. In addition to 3RNET, the Career Center maintained a subscription to PracticeLink, which saw 40 candidates express interest in one or more of the 75 open positions posted on behalf of community health centers. The Career Center hosted a series of career events across the state in Erie, which had 24 attendees; Pittsburgh, which had 57 attendees; Northeast PA, which had 45 attendees; and Philadelphia, which had 126 attendees. In collaboration with Carlow University, three nurse practitioner residents have been placed in Pittsburgh area community health centers as part of a residency pilot program.

Career Center staff recruited at statewide meetings of nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and physicians. Staff also met with numerous primary care residency programs and nursing, dental and physician assistant schools for recruitment.

Penn State University College of Medicine - Area Health Education Centers

In the 2023-24 state fiscal year, 332 clinical rotations for medical, physician assistant, and nurse practitioner students were completed. Of this total, 271 of the rotations were in underserved or safety net sites. In addition, 7,674 high school and college students received support and services to assist them in pursuing health profession degrees.

Penn State University – Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

During the 2023-24 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 rural human trafficking, health care transformation, community and public health, and grant writing webinars targeted to organizations providing health care in rural areas. In the 2023-24 state fiscal year, 824 types of technical assistance were provided to 1,110 individual clients, representing rural health care providers, hospitals, clinics, and clinical training programs; national, state, and community-based agencies and organizations; and others. The Office of Rural Health's website was accessed by 150,570 users.

University of Pennsylvania - Bridging the Gaps Program

The Bridging the Gaps Community Health Internship Program is partially funded through a state grant. During the 2023-24 state fiscal year, 121 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 121 students represented 63 communities in rural and urban communities across Pennsylvania.

Challenges and Recommendations

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

Conrad 30 J-1 Visa Waiver Program

The federal statute governing this program places 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 increased our capabilities to compile these statistics, further development of our data gathering resources would produce more accurate information.

Recommendation: Completion of the licensure surveys could be mandated by passing legislation requiring it as part of the renewal of licenses to practice in Pennsylvania. Such a law could alleviate some of the complaints currently experienced by the Department of State concerning the surveys. In addition, the PCO will continue to educate health care providers on the importance of completing the licensure surveys. Furthermore, the PCO is continuing to refine 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 2023-24.

	CBHC Grantees	Visa Waiver Physicians	Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			Primary Medical Care	Dental	Mental Health
Adams					
Allegheny		21	2	6	1
Armstrong		1	3	1	
Beaver			1		
Bedford				5	
Berks	1	1		2	1
Blair		12	2		
Bradford		4		2	2
Bucks					
Butler			3		
Cambria	1	5	1		
Cameron		1			
Carbon					
Centre	1	1		1	1
Chester	1		2		1
Clarion	1		1	4	
Clearfield		2		3	
Clinton	1				
Columbia					
Crawford		4	1	1	
Cumberland		1			1
Dauphin		4		5	
Delaware		1	1		
Elk		2		2	
Erie		14	2	2	
Fayette	1	9	3	2	
Forest				1	
Franklin		5	1	2	1
Fulton					
Greene					
Huntingdon			1	1	
Indiana		1			

			Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			Primary Medical Care	Dental	Mental Health
Jefferson		1			3
Juniata		1		1	
Lackawanna	2	9		1	1
Lancaster				4	
Lawrence		5			1
Lebanon					1
Lehigh	1		1	1	
Luzerne	1			1	1
Lycoming				2	1
McKean		2			
Mercer		3	1	1	
Mifflin					
Monroe					
Montgomery					1
Montour		1			
Northampton					1
Northumberland		4			1
Perry					
Philadelphia	2	24	15	17	11
Pike				1	
Potter		1			
Schuylkill				1	
Snyder					
Somerset		2			
Sullivan					
Susquehanna					
Tioga		1			
Union					
Venango		3		1	
Warren		1			
Washington	1	1		2	1
Wayne	1	2		3	4
Westmoreland		5		1	
Wyoming					
York			2		
Totals	15	155	43	77	35