

An NJAFP White Paper

Perspectives on Family Physician Workforce in New Jersey

Shortage of Family Physicians

Family physicians represent a significant proportion of the primary care workforce in New Jersey. As efforts to improve the quality and safety of health care look to new integrated models, there is a real imperative to look at workforce needs. A robust evidence base exists for the cost-effective care provided by family physicians and the value of family medicine and primary care to the health of individuals and populations. Despite the depth of the evidence and the frequency with which it is presented, primary care in New Jersey remains undervalued and under fire.

- **IMPACT OF DISPROPORTIONATE DISTRIBUTION OF MEDICAL SPECIALTIES:** Family Physicians, general internists, and general pediatricians have been outnumbered by other specialists in New Jersey. Despite this disparity, these primary care physicians have continued to provide a larger proportion of office-based visits than other specialists. Given the proven, vital role of primary care physicians in improving the health of the population, the trend downward for students selecting family medicine as a medical specialty pleads for immediate attention by medical educators and policy makers at federal and state levels. Incentives, including loan redemption programs, increased insurance payments, reduction of managed care hassle factors, and assistance with professional liability insurance are areas which New Jersey could address in order to retain and attract more primary care physicians.
- **DELIVERY SYSTEM UNDERVALUES PRIMARY CARE:** The primary care physician workforce has become an undervalued service in today's health care delivery system which threatens access to care and impedes the achievement of better health for all. Primary care physicians work hard for their patients, but their compensation is not correlated to their work effort when compared with physicians in other specialties. This disparity contributes to student disinterest in primary care specialties, including family medicine. Continuing to pay primary care physicians considerably less than other physician specialties discourages medical students from choosing primary care careers. A better balance of physician payment for care is urgently needed.
- **COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS:** Community Health Centers (CHC) and Federal Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) depend upon family physicians to meet the needs of millions of medically underserved people. These health care safety net programs look to family physicians to provide medical homes to medically underserved people. Primary care physicians – with more than half being family physicians - compose 95 percent of the physician staffing at FQHCs. With the increased support for these centers, policymakers need to consider how changes in the production and retention of family physicians in our state would affect these programs, including barriers to entering the specialty: high administrative costs, constraints on providing coordination of care, and low payments for primary care practices.

- **IMPROVE AND EXPAND PRIMARY CARE LOAN REDEMPTION PROGRAM:** With physicians' student loan debt reaching \$200,000 more work needs to be done to understand the impact student debt will continue to have on specialty choice, practice location and patient population served (for example, acceptance of certain health plans and Medicaid). One way the state can encourage more family physicians to practice in New Jersey is to improve upon its education and marketing of the Primary Care Loan Redemption Program, which provides loan redemption for physicians and other primary care providers who practice in state designated medically underserved municipalities. The NJAFP would recommend the state target medical school's family medicine departments and family physician residency programs across the country to provide incentives for a new generation of family physicians to practice in New Jersey. However, New Jersey does not just need family physicians in underserved communities. NJAFP would encourage the state to consider expanding loan redemption for family physicians practicing in all communities in New Jersey and establish a loan forgiveness program for family physicians practicing in our underserved communities.

- **SUPPORT OF FAMILY MEDICINE AT OUR MEDICAL SCHOOLS:** It is unfortunate for New Jersey, that our own state medical schools in recent years has sent the message to its students, faculty and public that family medicine is of lesser value than other medical specialties. NJAFP working with Senators Vitale and Weinberg was successful to prevent the UMDNJ-RWJ Medical School's efforts to eliminate its Department of Family Medicine at the New Brunswick Campus. The Department of Family Medicine and its staff at our state medical schools are essential for New Jersey to produce a new generation of family physicians to practice in our state.