

# Primary Health Care Practitioners Program Annual Report 2022

**Pennsylvania Primary  
Care Office**

**March 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:

- ❖ 77 HPSA applications submitted for federal approval;
- ❖ 107 practitioners in the primary care loan repayment program;
- ❖ 140 physicians participated in the visa waiver programs;
- ❖ 16 community-based health care grants;
- ❖ nine family residency slots supported;
- ❖ 772 students in health care fields participated in community-based rotations;
- ❖ 177 currently approved National Health Service Corps sites; and
- ❖ 153 students participated in a health-related summer internship representing 73 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**

<b>DISCIPLINE</b>	<b>SPECIALTY</b>
Physicians <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MDs</li> <li>• DOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Medicine</li> <li>• General Internal Medicine</li> <li>• General Pediatrics</li> <li>• Obstetrics/Gynecology</li> <li>• Geriatrics</li> <li>• Psychiatry</li> </ul>
Physician Assistants - Certified Certified Registered Nurse Practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult Health</li> <li>• Family Health</li> <li>• Pediatrics</li> <li>• Women’s Health</li> <li>• Geriatrics</li> <li>• Psychiatric-Mental Health</li> </ul>
Certified Nurse-Midwives	N/A
Dentists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Dentistry</li> <li>• Pediatric Dentistry</li> </ul>
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 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 2020-21**

<b>Program</b>	<b>State Budget</b>	<b>Federal Budget</b>
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	
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4,550,000</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>

## Findings

### Shortage Designation

One of the priorities for this period was to prepare for the national update of geographic and population HPSAs in September 2021. Of the 123 geographic or population HPSAs in Pennsylvania, 77 were analyzed and submitted for approval by the national update.



The remaining 46 HPSAs were analyzed and discovered to no longer meet criteria for designation. This phenomenon of a large portion of HPSAs no longer meeting designation criteria occurred in many areas across the United States during the national update.

One of the reasons for HPSAs no longer meeting criteria for designation is that programs operated by the PCO and the federal government are designed to promote the recruitment and retention of health care providers in these underserved areas. Furthermore, the staff in the PCO have increased our ability to gather provider information compared to the prior national updates. More providers in the calculations resulted in lower population-to-provider ratios, thus causing the relevant HPSA to no longer meet criteria for designation. The staff of the PCO are in the process of analyzing the 46 HPSAs, proposed for withdrawal, to determine if there is adequate justification for them to be redesignated. The PCO staff also continue to respond to requests for new designations, as they are received.

### **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, 17 NHSC site certifications and two recertification applications were submitted by the PCO. According to the December 2021 Field Strength Report from the NHSC, there were 177 NHSC sites and 338 participants in Pennsylvania.

### **Pennsylvania Primary Care Loan Repayment Program**

The following table summarizes the applications to the LRP during the 2020-21 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 2020-21**

	<b>Applications Received</b>	<b>Applicants Deemed Ineligible</b>	<b>Grant Awards</b>
Primary Medical	102	18	28
Dental	37	10	10
Mental Health	72	14	13
Total	211	42	51

Combining these grantees with those providing their second year of service, 107 primary care practitioners were obligated to practice in medically underserved areas of Pennsylvania during this reporting period.



## **Physician Visa Waiver Programs**

During the 2020-21 state fiscal year, the PCO supported 30 J-1 visa waiver applications, six ARC waivers, and two NIW applications. Combining these providers with participants already in the program, the commonwealth had 140 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 2020-21 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 18,776 new patients and 83,363 low-income patient visits during the 2020-21 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, networks and partners with various agencies and schools with the goal of addressing the primary care shortage in Pennsylvania.

Between July 1, 2020, and June 30, 2021, the Career Center placed 20 candidates. The Career Center currently has 229 jobs posted and 6,352 candidates in their database. Two virtual career fairs were held in the fall of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Primary Care and Dental career fair on October 8 drew 18 employers as exhibitors, about 160 registrations, and 32 candidates. The Behavioral Health career fair on November 10 was attended by 13 employers and about 25 candidates; more than 60 candidates registered.

## **Penn State University College of Medicine - Area Health Education Centers**

During the last state fiscal year, 772 students participated in community-based rotations: 521 medical students, 102 medical residents, and 149 other students. These other students included nurse practitioners, physician assistants, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, surgical technologists, pharmacy residents, nursing administration, health administration, and dental hygiene students. For the medical students, 73 percent of those rotations were in HPSAs or at safety-net sites.

## **Penn State University – Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health**

During the 2020-21 state fiscal year, the Office of Rural Health staff served on a wide range of 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 also organized several workshops to assist organizations providing health care in rural areas. Furthermore, 750 requests for technical assistance and information were filled during the 2020-21 state fiscal year.

## **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 153 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 153 students represented 73 community sites in rural and urban communities across Pennsylvania.

## **Act 24 of 2020**

In May 2020, Governor Wolf signed Act 24 into law. This Act required the Department of Health to distribute \$10 million in funds received from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to community-based health care centers according to a prescribed formula. Act 24 required the Department to reimburse grantees for COVID-related expenses incurred between March 1 and November 30, 2020. In addition to normal operations, the PCO was assigned the task of fulfilling this requirement. Our office developed and monitored grant agreements with 43 community-based health centers for COVID-related costs.

## **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 2020-21 state fiscal year, only about 30 percent of eligible applicants received an award.

**Recommendation:** Enhance state funding to increase grant awards. Each additional \$1 million in annual funding could yield approximately 35 more awards on average.

## 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 2020-21.**

			Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			CBHC Grantees	Visa Waiver Physicians	Primary Medical Care
Adams					
Allegheny		15		1	3
Armstrong		1	1		
Beaver			1		
Bedford		2	1	1	
Berks	2	1	3	1	
Blair		9			
Bradford		5			
Bucks					
Butler		1			
Cambria	1	5	1		2
Cameron		1			1
Carbon					
Centre	1	1	1		
Chester	1		1		
Clarion		1	2		
Clearfield		1	1		1
Clinton				1	
Columbia					
Crawford		4			3
Cumberland					
Dauphin		2	1		
Delaware		1	3		
Elk		1	3		
Erie		11	2		2
Fayette		9	2		
Forest					
Franklin		4	3	1	1
Fulton					
Greene			1		1
Huntingdon			4		
Indiana					1

			Primary Care Loan Repayment Participants		
			Primary Medical Care	Dental	Mental Health
	CBHC Grantees	Visa Waiver Physicians			
Jefferson					
Juniata		3			
Lackawanna	1	8	1	1	1
Lancaster	2		1	2	
Lawrence		5			
Lebanon					
Lehigh			1		2
Luzerne		2			
Lycoming				2	
McKean		3	2		
Mercer			1		
Mifflin					1
Monroe					
Montgomery	1		1		1
Montour					
Northampton		1	1		
Northumberland		4			
Perry					
Philadelphia	2	12	11	10	6
Pike			1		
Potter		4			
Schuylkill	1	2			1
Snyder					
Somerset		7			
Sullivan					
Susquehanna					
Tioga					
Union					
Venango		4		1	
Warren		2	1		
Washington	1		2		
Wayne	2	3	2	2	
Westmoreland		5			
Wyoming				1	
York	1				
<b>Totals</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>