



Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee

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61st Montana Legislature

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February 9, 2010

The Honorable Max Baucus
United States Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-2602

Dear Senator Baucus:

Our interim legislative committee has spent the past several months reviewing issues involving the health care workforce in Montana, as part of a study of health care in the state. As you are aware, Montana lacks a sufficient number of primary care providers to serve our rural and far-flung population. This shortage would be exacerbated if federal health care legislation extends insurance coverage to more people, who would then seek care from a primary care provider.

At a committee meeting last month, we learned more about the Montana Family Residency Program headquartered in Billings. This program gives medical school graduates an opportunity to obtain their residency training not just in Montana but -- even more importantly -- in rural areas of Montana. The common maxim is that doctors tend to set up practice in the area where they received their residency training. This appears to be holding true for the Montana program, as 70 percent of its graduates are practicing in Montana.

Committee members also heard about how the limits on Medicare funding for residency slots make it more difficult for this program and other existing residency programs to expand, because the Medicare funds make up the bulk of the funding for the programs.

We know that the reform bills pending in Congress would address this issue to some degree, by redistributing slots that aren't in use, and we support the proposed redistributions. However, we also feel that action needs to be taken on this matter if a final reform bill isn't passed or doesn't include the provisions for re-allocating residency slots. We strongly encourage you to take whatever action is possible to lift the funding cap on residencies for underserved areas or to redistribute unused slots to states with the lowest number of residents per capita. Either step would benefit Montana. Increasing residency training here is a critical factor in ensuring that our residents have access to health care in the future, no matter where in Montana they live.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Representative Diane Sands
Presiding Officer

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