

# National Health Service Corps to Get Overhaul

BY DENISE NAPOLI

WASHINGTON — With \$2.5 billion in Recovery Act funding, major changes are in the works for the National Health Service Corps.

And according to new Health Resources and Services Administration director Mary Wakefield, Ph.D., R.N., the money comes just in time.

Last year, 14,000 medical and nursing school graduates applied to the National Health Service Corps, the division of HRSA that recruits health professionals to shortage areas by offering full or partial repayment of their student loans, said Dr. Wakefield at a recent physician workforce conference sponsored by the Association of American Medical Colleges. "But the agency was only budget-

ed to respond to one out of every seven requests, in spite of a tremendous need for those providers."

The shortfall was even more dire for nurses—9,000 applications were received for 600 budgeted slots.

But this year, with an extra \$300 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act specifically allocated to the agency's health professions programs, the corps will accept about 4,100 more doctors, dentists, and nurses than last year.

The application and placement processes for the corps are also being overhauled, according to Dr. Wakefield. Previously, applicants had a fixed, annual, 30-day window to apply; however, "beginning in May, HRSA will suspend that requirement for the 2-year duration

of the Recovery Act, and switch to a rolling application model." Dr. Wakefield added that she will push for this open enrollment model to continue even after the Recovery Act money runs out.

A provisional prequalification program will also be put into place, so that medical and nursing school students can apply and receive notification of acceptance while still in their final year of school. Previously, only licensed graduates were eligible, resulting in a lag between graduation and corps service.

HRSA-approved health care sites will also be able to post more jobs to the online corps job board. Until now, only two vacancies per specialty were allowed per site, no matter the actual need.

"That was designed to help with distribution of practitioners across the na-

tion," Dr. Wakefield said. "But now, with the incredible expansion of the corps under the Recovery Act, HRSA will allow eligible sites to advertise up to six vacancies per specialty."

The changes should add up to an infusion of health care workers in rural and shortage areas in 2009 and 2010. "I don't think this opportunity, of this magnitude and this importance, will come along very often," Dr. Wakefield said. "It won't solve all of our problems, but it's going to help to buy us some time."

Dr. Wakefield was appointed to her current position in February by President Obama. Prior to joining the government, she was an associate dean for rural health at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Grand Forks. ■

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