Opinion: Congress inaction threatens critical doctor-training program

By Eric Henley, | March 04, 2020

Despite clear need, one of the most effective pipelines for producing primary care physicians could end May 22

A recent workforce report from the UCSF HealthForce Center projects that by 2030, California will experience a 12% to 17% greater demand for primary care medical services than what currently exists.

This need will be further exacerbated by a projected decrease in the number of primary care physicians in the state due to increasing retirements of older physicians and fewer entering younger physicians. This shortage will not be completely addressed by increasing numbers of primary care nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

Despite this clear need, one of the most effective pipelines for producing primary care physicians – the Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education Program – could end on May 22 unless Congress votes to extend it. Support from Congress and President Trump is essential to ensure that we keep this program alive for the medical residents, communities and patients who benefit.

The Teaching Health Center (THC) program was created as part of the Affordable Care Act to increase the residency training of primary care physicians in the community, especially in under-served communities. While most residencies are in hospitals, THCs are based in the community, most often in Federally Qualified Health Centers whose main purpose is to provide care for under-served populations, such as the uninsured and those covered by MediCal.

Research shows that more than 80% of THC graduates work in primary care – over half in underserved areas, and over a third in community health centers. By comparison, only 25% of graduates of traditional residency programs work in underserved areas, and 2% work in community health centers. Currently, there are THCs spread over 27 states and the District of Columbia.

LifeLong Medical Care, a large Federally Qualified Health Center in the East Bay, has recently been accredited as a Teaching Health Center to start a new family medicine residency in Richmond this summer. We at LifeLong pursued accreditation to increase the number of primary care family physicians working in safety-net health centers like ours.
Rooted in the Gray Panther’s senior activism more than 40 years ago, LifeLong has grown from its flagship health center — the Over 60 Health Center — to a robust network of 16 primary care clinics, three dental clinics, four school-based health centers, two urgent-care centers, home-based services at 13 supportive housing sites, and medical care at multiple nursing homes across Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

Last year we served more than 64,000 people, 77% of whom were living at or below the federal poverty level.

By moving primary care training into the community, LifeLong is on the leading edge of innovative education programming dedicated to meeting not only patient needs, but also future health care workforce needs.

We are one of only a handful of new programs to receive federal funding this year to support our training costs. It is a four-year grant and, after this year, our funding will only continue if the program is re-authorized and funded.

We hope Congress passes the bill to make this happen before the May deadline, and that the president signs it.

Dr. Eric Henley oversees LifeLong Medical Cares’s new family medicine residency.

To read the original article: https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2020/03/04/opinion-congress-inaction-threatens-critical-doctor-training-program/