



Durbin Introduces Bipartisan Legislation to Strengthen Rural Health Workforce Copy About Title Case

by Chris Rhodes, Reporter
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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, along with Senators Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), Kevin Cramer (R-ND), Doug Jones (D-AL), and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), introduced bipartisan legislation to address critical rural health workforce shortages. The *Rural America Health Corps Act* would create a new program that improves the existing National Health Service Corps (NHSC) program by providing new dedicated student loan forgiveness funding for health care providers that serve in rural communities. Twenty percent of Americans live in rural communities, yet only 11 percent of physicians practice in rural settings. Across Illinois, 3.3 million people live in communities with shortages of doctors, five million people live in communities with shortages of mental health professionals, and 2.3 million people live in communities with shortages of dentists.

“Patients across rural Illinois face challenges accessing the health care they need because of serious workforce shortages – with too few medical providers and long distances between them. Our bipartisan bill provides new funding and support for rural communities by expanding loan forgiveness programs so we can attract and retain more doctors, dentists, behavioral health specialists, and nurses,” Durbin said.

The current NHSC program provides up to \$50,000 annually to repay student loans for primary care doctors, dentists, behavioral health clinicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants for two years of service in a “health professional shortage area.” Eligible locations include urban and rural hospitals and community health clinics with a shortage of providers. It provides approximately 3,100 new loan forgiveness awards each year—but only 30 percent of NHSC program participants serve in rural communities.

The *Rural America Health Corps Act* would create a new \$25 million program that would bolster the existing rural NHSC placements and would provide funding for up to five years – an increase from the current two-year forgiveness period – for doctors, dentists, behavioral health specialists, and nurse practitioners, which would assist with recruitment and retention efforts.