

Health Profession Training Opportunities at Community Health Centers

HEALTH CENTERS AND WORKFORCE TRAINING PROGRAMS

Community, Migrant, Homeless, and Public Housing Health Centers are community-directed safety net providers now serving 18 million* predominately low-income, uninsured or publicly insured individuals. Their 6,600-plus delivery sites reach underserved areas across every state and territory. Health centers provide comprehensive solutions to overcoming health care barriers by addressing each community's and patient's needs and by providing high quality primary and preventive health care, dental services, pharmacy, behavioral health care, and services that facilitate access to care such as case management, transportation, health education, translation, and social services.

Unfortunately, health centers are struggling with significant staff shortages of primary care professionals.¹ At the same time, declining interest in primary care fields among health care professionals and acute shortages of such professionals in underserved areas add considerable strain to health centers' ability to meet community health needs.² Federal Health Professions Training Programs play a critical role in encouraging needed health care professionals to serve in health centers. Health centers, in turn, offer valuable and unique training opportunities given their diverse range of services and patient populations.

FEDERAL HEALTH PROFESSION TRAINING PROGRAMS

Several federal Health Profession Training Programs support training institutions, such as schools and universities sponsoring residency placements, in their mission to place health professionals in training environments serving underserved and isolated communities. Not only do these programs help fill staffing shortages in the long-term, they also expose health care professionals to working in these communities and encourage them to locate there upon completion of training. These programs target health care professions often lacking in underserved areas, and are particularly important for health centers.

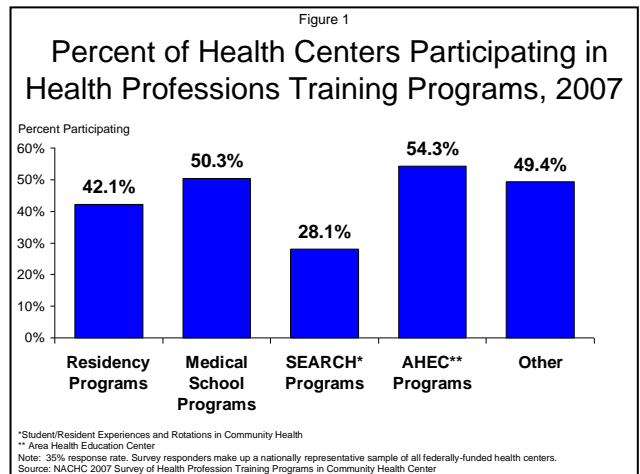
Titles VII and VIII of the Public Health Service Act build the training and educational infrastructure for residency programs, and seek to boost the number of health professionals in communities where too few providers serve. Title VII specifically supports training programs for primary care physicians, dentists, physician assistants, and other health professionals, while Title VIII is dedicated to supporting training opportunities for nurses.³ Studies have found that Title VII-exposed medical students are 27.5% more likely to work in health centers than non-Title VII-exposed students.⁴ In particular, the Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) program is designed to promote expansion of primary care in underserved areas. AHECs are responsible for recruiting, training, and retaining health care professionals committed to working with underserved populations.

The Student/Resident Experiences and Rotations in Community Health (SEARCH) program works in conjunction with the National Health Service Corps to improve the supply and distribution of health care professionals through community and academic educational partnerships. SEARCH provides

students and residents with opportunities to develop hands-on training experiences working with people in underserved rural and urban areas. Together, these programs are major contributors of health care professionals at health centers.

HEALTH CENTER INVOLVEMENT IN HEALTH PROFESSION TRAINING PROGRAMS

According to NACHC’s fall 2007 survey of health centers participation in health profession training programs, **87% of responding health centers participate** in at least one program. As shown in Figure 1, more than half of health centers partner with AHEC programs (54.3%) and with medical schools directly (50.3%). More than two in five centers also serve as training sites for primary care residency programs. More than half of all responding health centers serve as training sites for medical students, physician residents, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and physician assistants. Other common provider types being trained at health centers include clinical social workers, dentists, psychologists, and other nurses.



When asked the most important factors related to their participation in health profession training programs, health centers most commonly rated improved recruitment and retention of health professionals, the chance to influence students’ career practice decisions, and affiliations with academic health centers, hospitals, and universities as the most important reasons. **More than two-thirds (68.9%) of respondents have hired a health professional who was trained at their health centers within the previous five years.** However, when asked about the challenges affecting their participation, health centers most commonly reported loss of productivity and cost as the most important factors. Among centers hosting training programs, **the vast majority of health centers receive no funding from university or hospital training programs, foundations, or state government to cover the costs of training,** such as time, loss of productivity, and supplies.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Health centers understand the importance and value of their involvement in health professions training, not only in terms of ensuring a robust primary care workforce, but also to enhance their ability to successfully recruit and retain skilled clinicians committed to working in underserved areas. For these reasons, health centers are committed to participating in and providing training opportunities through federal, state and local state programs. Continuation and expansion of these training programs will help address health centers’ workforce challenges and enable health centers to expand health care access to more underserved communities. However, the costs that health centers bear when providing training must be taken into account in order to broaden health center participation without taking away from patient care.