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Program for Rural Docs-to-be Gets a Boost

JEROME -- One year after its inception, the Magic Valley's rural medical training program is adding more budding physicians to its clinic. Thanks to a five-year grant extension, the Magic Valley Rural Training Track can recruit two more resident physicians next year, and another two the following year.

The program is designed to train residents in rural family medicine. Expanding the program will help ease the strain of a state lagging in primary care doctors.

Idaho ranks last of all the states in physicians per capita, said Jim Irwin, an attending physician who oversees the program's residents. "There is a desperate need for doctors in Idaho," Irwin said. "There is also an incredible need for rural doctors in a state like this; we need replacements in the pipeline."

Bringing young doctors to practice in the state is the first step in solving this crisis. More than 70 percent of doctors stay within 100 miles of where they did their residencies.

However, while the program may be able to sustain more residents, the amount of patients coming to the clinic has declined. "The cuts to Medicare and Medicaid have impacted our patient volume," Irwin said. "This is unfortunate for several reasons. Residents need patients for training, but, more importantly, rural communities need programs like this to meet their needs."

Jeannette Walker was the Magic Valley program's first resident to participate in the program. As she goes into her third year of residency, she says the biggest challenge she's faced is gaining trust within the medical community.

"This is still a new program," she said. "I've had to help others understand what it is that I can do as a resident."

Under this program, first-year residents begin in Boise and then move to the rural area for the remaining two years. Once in the Magic Valley, residents switch between working at the family physician clinic in Jerome and practicing with specialists in Twin Falls.

Walker sees 10 to 12 patients per day. As a resident, she must be overseen by an attending physician, even though she is licensed to practice medicine.

"I've worked with most of the community physicians in the area," she said. "In order for this program to continue succeeding, we need to interact within our own community to see how we can help each other."