

College of Medicine to extend program to help rural areas

Ten years ago, the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford tried to start closing the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots," medically speaking. It was an important landmark for Illinois, which ranks sixth in the U.S. for its number of counties without a physician.

A decade later, the Rural Medical Education Program (RMED) has been such a success that the university is extending it to other health professions such as nursing, pharmacy, public health and social work.

The Rockford-based Center for Rural Health Professions Education, Evaluation and Research will recruit college graduates from rural areas of Illinois and bordering states for the graduate programs based at UIC in Chicago. The center also will set up four-month training stints in rural counties where students eventually might practice.

Illinois has 102 counties, 84 of which are considered rural by the state Department of Public Health. Of those 84, 75 are designated as medically under-served.

"We want them to be ready to make a lifelong commitment," said Dr. Bernard Salafsky, dean of the

medical college. Nearly all the 100 students who have been through the RMED program grew up in rural communities and took a pledge to return there.

"There are significant shortfalls in terms of all types of health professionals in rural areas," Salafsky explained. Only eight of Illinois' 94 counties have a health department led by a professional with at least a master's degree in public health. "There's also a horrific need for people trained in mental health in these communities," he said.

With approval this spring from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the medical school is now shopping for a new assistant dean to head the center, known as RPEER. Salafsky expects the center, which has received \$200,000 in seed money, to begin recruiting students at colleges, county fairs and community events later this year.

—By Gayle Worland

**UPDATE
ON THE
NEWS**

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