

Our Views

Rural health

Medical college could create opportunity for state

The Illinois governor has an economic development program called Opportunity Returns. As he and legislators decide the budget for the next fiscal year, they must remember this:

One big opportunity has been here in Rockford all along.

A program in rural health-care education at the local campus of the University of Illinois College of Medicine has been a national and international model. The state has a chance to build on that success, and it should.

TWENTY PERCENT of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, although only 9 percent of doctors practice there. The problem was once considered intractable. But 10 years ago, the local medical college started training physicians for rural practice. Today, 70 percent of its graduates practice medicine in 18 rural Illinois counties. Ninety percent practice in rural areas across America.

The local program is one of only a few in the nation to encourage aspiring doctors to return to their roots. It recruits and trains medical students from rural areas to practice in rural areas.

That's a success in itself. But there's more.

The university would like to build a \$24 million National Center for Rural Health Professions at Rockford. The school says the project could translate into \$84 million in economic impact for the Rockford area and 150 new jobs during construction. That's not to mention the hundreds of health-care professionals who could be trained to work in rural areas. And not doctors only.

In the past four years, the college has developed an interdisciplinary approach to rural health care. It has trained dentists, nurses, pharmacists and social workers, too.

U of I President James Stukel visited the Editorial Board this week in support of the project. Because the concept is unique, Stukel said it invites federal and foundation matching funds. Last month, university officials said they were confident \$7 million could be raised privately.

Also last month, U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo said he could deliver at least \$1.9 million from the U.S. government. The university asked for \$3 million more. First, Manzullo said, he needs to know if the state's serious.

That's the \$12 million question.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich says the center makes perfect sense but he can't promise a thing until lawmakers pass his budget proposal — the same one that raises taxes on businesses.

We think lawmakers should resist that false choice. To reward one successful model, you don't need to render other businesses less successful.

THE GOVERNOR'S budget people say they are tired of hearing from folks who have no solutions to the state's fiscal crisis, only criticism.

We just want him to see that the center is a solution. Expanded rural health care could add \$85 million and 728 jobs to Illinois' rural economies after five years and \$170 million and 2,910 jobs after 20 years.

And rural areas get the doctors, nurses, pharmacists and social workers they sorely lack.

Illinois should not pass up this opportunity.