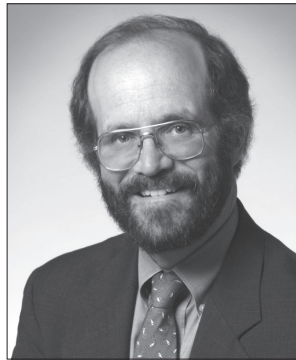


Byron Crouse, MD



Robert N. Golden, MD

A Strategic Approach to Addressing the Rural Wisconsin Physician Shortage

Byron Crouse, MD, and Robert N. Golden, MD

Twenty years ago, Philip Farrell, MD, and Michael Dunn, MD—then-deans of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH) and Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), respectively—led a statewide assessment of Wisconsin’s health care needs. The assessment showed that Wisconsin had a growing shortage of physicians in rural areas.

The UWSMPH began actively taking steps to address this need. Through a series of coordinated efforts, it created educational opportunities and specialized programs for individuals ranging from middle school students to established practicing physicians. The goals then, and now, include expanding the diversity and number of physicians practicing in Wisconsin, improving trainees’ skills in team-based care, and preparing for ongoing changes in health care delivery systems.

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Byron Crouse, MD, is the associate dean for rural and community health, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH); Robert N. Golden, MD, is dean of the UWSMPH and vice chancellor for medical affairs, UW-Madison.

For more information

- Wisconsin AHEC programs: www.ahec.wisc.edu
- RUSCH: www.med.wisc.edu/25063
- WARM: www.med.wisc.edu/WARM
- WRPRAP: www.fammed.wisc.edu/rural/
- WiORH: www.worh.org/

One of the resulting UWSMPH entities is the Office of Rural and Community Health, which includes the Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) and Wisconsin Office of Rural Health (WiORH) and provides oversight of several community-based medical education programs. The Office of Rural and Community Health immediately began efforts to analyze assets, gaps, and opportunities, and created a strategic plan to improve health and health care in rural Wisconsin.

As shown in the Figure, the UWSMPH has created a continuum of “pipeline” programs—described below—that support our state’s physician workforce.

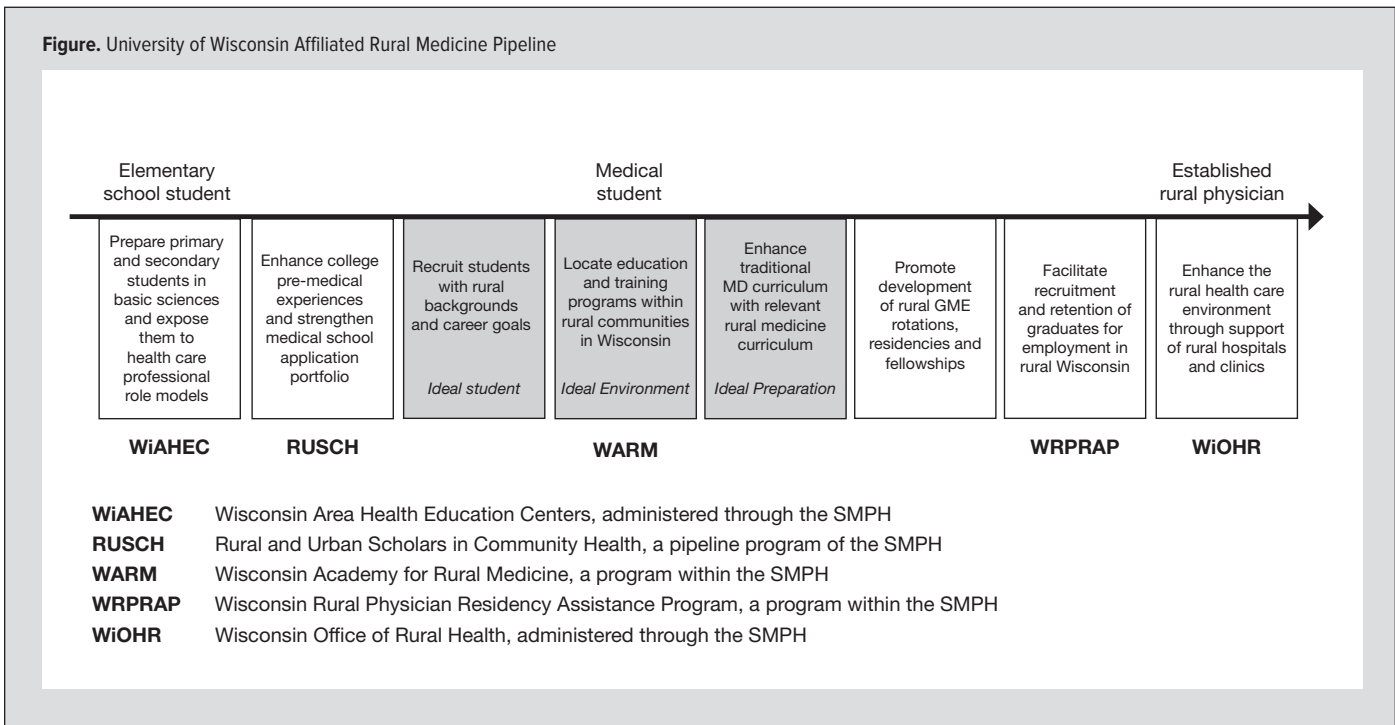
Wisconsin AHEC is a statewide organization with 7 regional centers and a system office housed in the UWSMPH. It is funded by state and federal programs that focus on enrichment experiences for high school students interested in health careers, commu-

nity-based training opportunities for health professions students, professional development programs for providers, and health promotion for Wisconsin residents. In 2015, 1,276 health professions students participated in AHEC-sponsored programs. Examples include the signature Community Health Internship Program (CHIP), which placed 85 students in local public health departments for 8-week experiences. Participants learn the importance of community engagement through direct experience.

Wisconsin Express is another such program. It provides 1-week cultural immersion experiences for health professions students throughout Wisconsin. They study a diverse population in a rural or urban setting by focusing on their own cultural awareness and self-reflection. During the past year, 100 students participated in Wisconsin Express.

UWSMPH faculty and staff, through their efforts to increase the number of medical students from underserved communities, noted that prospective students from disadvantaged areas often had less competitive applications. To address this disparity, the school created the Rural and Urban Scholars in Community Health (RUSCH) Program in 2006. Program staff help applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds enhance their portfolios so they can

Figure. University of Wisconsin Affiliated Rural Medicine Pipeline



submit stronger applications when they apply to medical school. We also assist those who are interested in working with underserved populations. The program has expanded to include partnerships with UW-Milwaukee, UW-Parkside, UW-Platteville, and Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Eighty-two students have participated in RUSCH; of them, 27 (35%) matriculated into medical school, and another 34% have entered other health professions.

Aspiring physicians who have a strong desire to practice in rural Wisconsin can apply to the 4-year Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM). The UWSMPH increased its class size by 26 students per year to accommodate this program, which was established in 2006. Initial funding for the planning and early development of WARM was provided by the Wisconsin Partnership Program, with sustained support provided by the UWSMPH and the Wisconsin Legislature.

WARM students spend their first 2 years in the traditional MD curriculum in Madison, where they are able to participate in extra experiences to prepare them for their final 2 years of clinical training in community-based rural clinics and hospitals. These experiences

support the students' goal to become rural physicians. Immersive experiences in rural areas provide positive mentors who nurture the students' passion to care for patients in medically underserved regions. To date, 102 students have graduated from WARM. Short-term outcomes show that 54% of graduates have entered primary care specialties, and 47% are completing their residency training in Wisconsin. The long-term outcomes, based on the 23 WARM graduates to date, show that 87% are practicing in Wisconsin, 52% are practicing in rural Wisconsin communities, and 30% are practicing in their hometowns.

While initiatives such as the UWSMPH's WARM Program and MCW's new campuses in Green Bay and Wausau have increased the number of medical students being trained in the state, academic leaders note that the number of residency positions in the state has not increased. Through advocacy efforts by the Wisconsin Hospital Association, the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, the Wisconsin Council on Medical Education and Workforce, the Wisconsin Medical Society, and the Wisconsin Academy of Family Physicians, the Wisconsin Legislature established 2 programs to expand the state's grad-

uate medical education offerings.

One of these programs is the Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program (WRPRAP), which is supporting the development of 3 new rural family medicine residency programs; new rural residency tracks in psychiatry, general surgery, and obstetrics and gynecology; 2 additional new family medicine residencies; and 2 new psychiatry residencies.

In addition to recruiting and training rural physicians, it is critical to keep them practicing here. Sustaining high-quality hospitals, emergency medical services, and rural clinics is integral to this success. The WIOHR plays a vital role in supporting Critical Access Hospitals in rural Wisconsin and assists with the recruitment and retention of physicians practicing in underserved communities through its New Physicians for Wisconsin Program and loan repayment incentives.

Through this series of programs, the UWSMPH is actively working to improve the health of rural Wisconsin residents. At the same time, we are helping medical graduates pursue their dreams of caring for patients in small towns and rural areas, often in the hometowns where they grew up.

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WMJ

WMJ (ISSN 1098-1861) is published through a collaboration between The Medical College of Wisconsin and The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. The mission of *WMJ* is to provide an opportunity to publish original research, case reports, review articles, and essays about current medical and public health issues.

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