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 THURSDAY,
APRIL 16,
2009
Vol 2.16

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A HealthMatch Made in Heaven

By Brian Rubin

ELLENVILLE – Is there a doctor in the house? The Catskill Hudson Area Health Education Center, or AHEC, wants to make sure that there is.

The not-for-profit organization's mission is to identify and address health manpower shortages by working with their partners in the healthcare and education fields to develop programs that will encourage people to consider health occupations as a career choice. Additionally, Catskill Hudson AHEC places students who are already in health career studies into rural and urban rotations, and also provides continuing education programs for those health professionals who are already in the profession.

In keeping with that mission, the organization has announced the launch of a pilot program called HealthMatch, which will help the Ellenville and Wawarsing community attract and retain physicians.

"There's a major shortage of physicians," says Kathryn Reed, the Executive Director of Catskill Hudson AHEC. "Everybody's vying for the same pool of people, so what you need to do is stand out as that unique community that that provider wants to move to out of all the other communities."

"There is a need for primary care and specialty physicians in Ellenville," she says.

To remedy this, the program will go through a number of phases in order to bring and retain doctors to the Ellenville-Wawarsing region. An important component of the program will identify community leaders who can help guide the not-for-profit's efforts more effectively. Another part will have the group host focus group meetings to try and find out more about what the community wants and needs. Furthermore, the program will seek to "rebrand" the area



to make it more attractive to doctors who could potentially relocate to the community; the organization will be bringing in a marketing consultant to help accomplish that.

"We feel that this program is unique in that it's really not just the hospitals' or the major healthcare providers' responsibility to recruit professionals and industry and business into the community, it really needs to engage the community in the process."

Starting on March 1, Catskill Hudson AHEC gained access to a \$200,000 grant under the banner of HEAL NY, which stands for Healthcare Efficiency and Affordability Law for New Yorkers, which will go towards the HealthMatch project in Ellenville. The organization will also look to get stakeholders in the community to establish incentive pools dedicated to helping provide financial boons and benefits to physicians and other healthcare professionals in order to help attract them to the area. Such incentives could include loan-forgiveness for newly graduated physicians, or low- to no-cost buildings where practices could be based for doctors who are trying to get on their feet after locating to a new area. In-kind services, too, can help make an area more attractive to a doctor looking to set up a practice in a new community.

"By engaging the community, and developing incentive programs to bring the providers is a very successful approach to recruitment retention of healthcare providers," says Reed.

No timetable for the program has been set, but Reed expects the wheels to begin turning in the next few weeks and months.

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