

## Primary-care docs wanted in Ellenville

*Business, civic leaders launch initiative to alleviate shortage*

Photo 1 of 1 | Zoom Photo +



Dr. Walter Sperling sits in his office in Ellenville on Thursday. Sperling is the only doctor left in the practice; he was once one of seven. On the desk is a copy of the Ellenville Press from 1966, the year he came to Ellenville. President Lyndon Johnson also came to Ellenville that year to dedicate the Ellenville Hospital. Times Herald-Record/STEVE BORLAND

### By Christian Livermore

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ELLENVILLE — Dr. Walter Sperling practices his craft alone in a medical building on Ellenville's Center Street. He used to share the space with several other doctors. But they've all retired or died.

Now the 76-year-old internist is the last man standing. In a time when older doctors are retiring and medical school graduates are spurning primary care in favor of high-paying specialties, Sperling — and Ellenville — have had a hard time attracting replacements.

"Let me TELL you," Sperling said. "I've been here since '66, and I've tried to get people here, I've tried to get help, and it's extremely difficult."

### DOCTORS WANTED

The number of medical students going into primary care has fallen 51.8 percent since 1997, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians. Only 31 percent of the nation's doctors are primary-care doctors now, and the academy estimates there will be a shortage of 40,000 family doctors by 2020.

The Hudson Valley needed 148 new physicians in 2007, according to the Healthcare Association of New York State. It got only 10.

Locally, primary-care doctors are getting older. Thirty-eight percent of Orange County doctors were 55 or older in 2008, according to a recent study by The Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach of SUNY New Paltz. In Sullivan, the over-55 docs make up 50 percent, and in Ulster, 41 percent.

The shortage of local doctors has led business and civic leaders in Ellenville and the surrounding Town of Wawarsing to partner with a nonprofit health-care work-force development organization, HealthMatch, a service of the Catskill Hudson Area Health Education Center. They're trying to raise \$200,000 for an incentive program of loan forgiveness, loans and grants to lure primary-care doctors. They're halfway to that goal and have begun recruiting two physicians.

Federal standards say a community the size of Wawarsing should have 14 primary-care doctors. It has eight full-time equivalents. But of those eight, three are over 60 years old and two more are over 50. When they retire, there's nobody to replace them.

"It really impacts your survivability as a hospital and as a community," said Steven Kelley, president and CEO of Ellenville Regional Hospital.

Insurance reimbursements for primary care are much lower than for specialists, and with an average debt of \$180,000 by the time a doctor completes residency, many graduates simply can't afford to practice primary care.

Rural communities such as Wawarsing have a harder time attracting physicians, who feel isolated from shopping, as well as cultural and leisure activities.

But the problem is by no means only Wawarsing's. The nation has been running low on primary-care doctors for years, and it's projected to get worse. The health-reform law just passed contains funding for primary-care training, but it will take years before that takes effect. And it is just the tip of what's needed.

Good medical services are also essential to recruiting employers. That's why Dwight Coombe got involved. He's the president of Sprague & Killeen Insurance, and also of the Greater Wawarsing Local Development Corp. It's charged with bringing businesses to the area. But those businesses need workers, and workers want schools and doctors.

"If a new employer wants to come to town because they love the area, but they can't attract new employees because we don't have good health services, it's a problem," he said.

clivermore@th-record.com