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News

## Ellenville area working to draw doctors

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ELLENVILLE — A fundraising effort to reverse the trend toward a dwindling number of primary care physicians serving western Ulster County has gotten a \$100,000 boost as part of a campaign to double that amount in the coming year.

The Ellenville/Wawarsing HealthMatch Campaign Kick-off Breakfast is scheduled for 8 a.m. Thursday at Honor's Haven Resort and Spa on Arrowhead Road. The need for new doctors will be reviewed by Dwight Coombe, president of Greater Wawarsing Local Development Corp.; Kathryn R. Reed, executive director of Catskill Hudson Area Health Education Center; Development Corp. member Raymond Matthews; Ulster County Public Health Director Dr. La Mar Hasbrouck; and Ellenville Regional Hospital President Steven Kelley.

"We are a federally designated health care provider shortage area (that) is becoming depopulated as far as doctors," Kelley said. "There are eight primary care doctors on our medical staff. We've lost one from a year ago, and they are not all full-time, and that's part of the problem. You've got some that are going to part-time."

The effect of losing physicians on community growth has led local business leaders to convince fellow business owners to contribute \$100,000 toward the campaign.

"If you don't have doctors, people aren't going to move to your communities and people are going to go away," Kelley said. "It becomes tough for those communities to become self-sustaining. Once people start going to Kingston and Middletown to see the doctor, that's where they are going to do their shopping and pretty soon they don't come back. They live there."

Kelley said concern has increased because many of the primary care doctors in the area are nearing retirement age and programs to place new physicians in experienced practices have not been successful.

"If something happens where the (older) doctors decide to retire or leave, we're going to be in a world of hurt," he said. "We need to do something about it by building the reserves of doctors. If we don't do it now, we could come to a point like many communities where they aren't able to support a doctor anymore."

"Doctors like to practice with other doctors; they don't want to be all alone," he said, "They want to have days off, they want to be able to sleep at night, and they can't do that if (they) are in solo practice."

Kelley said the fund is intended to help doctors offset the cost of establishing local practices.

"It depends on what they need," he said. "If they were in solo practice they would need to have money to pay to fund their accounts receivable, to fund office space, to fund computer equipment, and to fund operating expenses."

Ulster County Executive Michael Hein said the shortage of physicians is partly due to the reimbursements paid by federal programs that provide higher rates for neighboring counties like Dutchess that are in the New York City metropolitan service area.

“One of the core problems with that is facilities like Northern Dutchess (Hospital), which is farther from New York City technically than the Health Alliance Hudson Valley operation in Kingston, or Ellenville Hospital, receive greater reimbursement than an Ulster County hospital for providing the exact same thing,” Hein said. “So if a physician is planning on a surgery and the surgery location choice is Ulster County or Dutchess County and they are going to receive significantly more reimbursement because of the MSA, that’s a problem.

“Someone shouldn’t be making decisions based on ‘Where am I going to receive greater reimbursement?’” Hein said. “I believe this is arbitrary.”

Hein said talks with federal representatives to seek equity over reimbursement rates have been inconclusive. “In my opinion, it’s flat wrong,” he said. “It puts our facilities at a competitive disadvantage unnecessarily. They’re doing an incredible job and are being put at a competitive disadvantage.”

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