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ELLENVILLE — It's a fact Ellenville Regional Hospital CEO Steve Kelley has known for years: The hospital has too few primary-care physicians on its medical staff.

To meet federal standards, Ellenville and the surrounding Town of Wawarsing need to add eight primary-care doctors.

But it's an uphill battle, as older doctors are retiring and medical students are choosing higher-paying specialties over primary care. So far, Kelley has only been able to replace doctors who have left or retired.

Health-care associations, hospital leaders and medical practitioners have warned for years that the nation is running low on primary-care doctors.

A new report from the Healthcare Association of New York State warns the shortage is growing more dire, just three years before an estimated 1.2 million New Yorkers gain health coverage under the federal health-care reform law.

Nearly 80 doctors are needed immediately to provide coverage to residents in the seven-county Hudson Valley region, the association said. Nearly half of the practicing physicians in the region are older than 55; the association expected 83 to retire in 2010.

Health-care professionals say there are many reasons why the number of primary-care physicians is shrinking, but it's not because people aren't interested in becoming doctors.

Medical schools are bursting at the seams with students, said Dr. Joseph Bettencourt, a biology professor at Marist College and the adviser for pre-med and pre-health students. In fact, new medical schools have opened over the last few years to increase opportunities for aspiring doctors.

Part of the problem, professionals say, is that there's a pay inequity between primary care and specialty fields, and that may persuade new doctors to choose higher-paying specialties.

There are also social changes at work, in which more women are becoming doctors, but may work shorter hours or take time off to raise children.

Rural recruitment a challenge

Locally, the biggest impediment that health-care providers see in physician recruitment is our distance from the large medical centers and schools in New York City and its immediate suburbs. It's traditionally difficult to recruit in rural areas, a problem compounded by an inadequate mass-transit system on this side of the Hudson.

"We need to convince doctors to come here," said Hal Teitelbaum, CEO of Crystal Run Healthcare.

"Our success in recruitment stems from the fact that we can convince them that Crystal Run Healthcare is such a unique provider, that the region is a great area, there's proximity to the city, and many other things here — but at a much better cost."

Incentive program under way

Businesses and civic leaders in Ellenville and Wawarsing have been working with the Catskill Hudson Area Health Education Center, an arm of the nonprofit health-care work-force development organization HealthMatch, to create an incentive program to lure primary-care physicians to town.

Since the spring, they have raised \$200,000 for loan forgiveness, loans and grants, which brought a doctor — working specifically for the Department of Corrections in Ellenville — and two nurse practitioners to the community.

Kelley, the hospital CEO, has high hopes that this is just the beginning.

"We recognize that we have a difficult recruiting environment, and we've taken steps working with our community to address it," he said. "Will we (meet federal standards) in a year or two? I would say that's unlikely. However, we're going to make a dent in it."