



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 9, 2008

Media Contact: [Sara O'Keefe](#)

Phone: (303) 953-3655

New \$2 Million Program Brings Primary Care Doctors to Colorado's Underserved
Loan Repayment Program Removes Barriers to Practicing in Rural and Underserved Urban Communities

DENVER — Inspired in medical school by the real-world story of Dr. David Loxterkamp, a rural doctor in Maine and the author of "A Measure of My Days: The Journal of a Country Doctor," Paul Simmons, MD, decided to become a small-town community doctor. But looming loads were "a huge burden," says Simmons, now chief of staff for Haxtun Hospital District in rural northeast Colorado. Loan repayment and forgiveness programs "have been a part of my staying [in rural Colorado]" and provided "an incentive to do a really good job."

To remove barriers such as thousands of dollars in medical school loans for primary care physicians to practice in underserved urban and rural communities across the state, [The Colorado Health Foundation](#) has launched a \$2 million program to help physicians pay off education loans. The [Physician Loan Repayment Program](#) (PLRP) recently announced awards to [18 physicians](#), including Simmons, who will receive up to \$150,000 over three years while they practice in Federally Qualified Health Centers, rural health centers and ClinicNet facilities throughout Colorado (see map below).

The Program, a partnership with the [Colorado Community Health Network](#) and the [Colorado Rural Health Center](#), will establish Colorado as a leader in addressing local and national medical shortages by attracting and retaining more quality doctors in Colorado. Currently, 57 of Colorado's 64 counties are designated as [Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas](#), according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The Colorado Department of Labor and Employment estimates the demand for family and general practitioners will increase by [28 percent](#) through 2014.

"There are many parts of Colorado that are in desperate need of primary care physicians," says Jack Westfall, MD, director of the [Colorado Area Health Education Center](#), associate dean for Rural Health at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and a Foundation Board member. "Often the communities that are in most need of a physician have the fewest resources to recruit a doctor, leaving individuals to suffer worse health and making it difficult for communities to attract others to live and work there, which can impact the economy."

Businesses in two southern Colorado communities, both of which are served by [Peak Vista Community Health Centers](#), where two of the PLRP's physicians will work, raised the workforce issue with their local Chamber of Commerce. "The issue of physician shortages was placed on the Chamber's radar by our membership," says Stephannie Finley, President of Governmental Affairs and Public Policy at the [Greater Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce](#). "It is an ongoing discussion with our Chamber membership. We need to provide accessible and affordable health care in order to attract and retain businesses for our community. This grant will allow Peak Vista to serve a special niche of small business employers who sadly can't afford to give their employees the health benefits they might require."

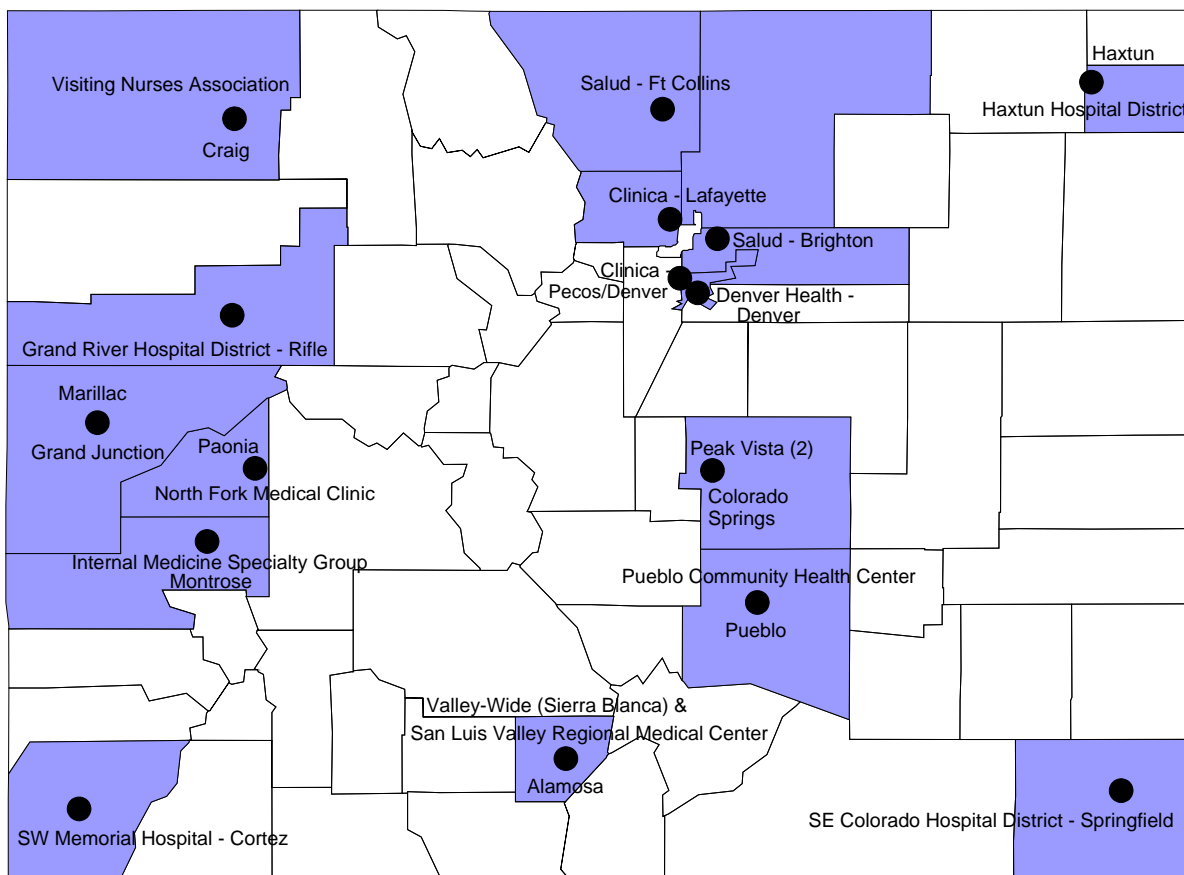
Colorado is not the only state projecting shortages in primary care physicians. Nationally, the Association of American Medical Colleges [reports](#) shortages in primary care physicians ranging from 55,000 to 85,000 by 2020, due in part to the growth and aging of the population. The Robert Graham Center [estimates](#) annual growth rates in the projected number of family physicians ranging from just under one percent to over three percent between 2005 and 2020. During that same period of time, population is expected to grow over 13 percent, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).

While a number of states offer loan repayment or forgiveness programs, the Foundation's program, one of the most generous in the country in terms of the amount awarded, will help place physicians in communities where they are most needed.

"Community Health Centers cannot compete dollar-for-dollar with for-profit employers, so benefits such as education loan repayment can make all the difference in a health care provider's ability to choose to work for a Community Health Center," explains Kitty Bailey, chief operating officer for the Colorado Community Health Network. "Working at a Community Health Center offers other benefits: strong team-based atmosphere, progressive disease management programs, medical malpractice liability coverage, a strong commitment to serving the needs of local communities and a chance to be a health care hero."

Thanks to loan repayment programs Simmons has been a health care hero in Haxtun. He describes his time spent there as "wonderful." He sees the impact daily of areas that do not have primary care physicians and has additional ideas to address shortages. "I'd like to see a town send a local kid to med school and then see that he comes back to practice in the community he already knows." After serving in rural health for at least the next decade, Simmons hopes to move to academia where he can help inspire medical students to practice primary care in underserved communities, where, he says, "It's a more individualistic [and personal] setting."

Map of 2008 Physician Loan Repayment Program Awards



About The Colorado Health Foundation

The Colorado Health Foundation works to make Colorado the healthiest state in the nation by increasing the number of Coloradans with health insurance, ensuring they have access to quality, coordinated care and encouraging healthy living. The Foundation invests in the community through grants and initiatives to health-related nonprofits that focus on these goals, as well as operating medical education programs to increase the health care workforce. The Foundation's assets of more than \$1 billion include an investment portfolio as well as an ownership interest in Denver's HealthONE hospital system. For more information, please visit www.ColoradoHealth.org.

About Colorado Community Health Network

The Colorado Community Health Network (CCHN) is the collective voice for Colorado's 14 Community Health Centers (CHCs) and their patients. CHCs provide a health care home to more than 500,000 of their community members – one in 10 people in Colorado – from 60 of the state's 64 counties. Without CHCs, hundreds of thousands of Colorado's low-income families and individuals would have no regular source of health care. CCHN's mission is to increase access to high quality health care for people in need in Colorado. For more information, please visit www.cchn.org.

About Colorado Rural Health Center

The Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC) is an independent, non-profit, membership-based organization that serves as the State Office of Rural Health for Colorado. It is a diverse mix of people, programs and places interested in Colorado's rural healthcare that has a growing list of activities and accomplishments. The Colorado Rural Health Center offers programs and services to ensure that rural communities have access to adequate healthcare. For more information, please visit www.coruralhealth.org.

###