Office of Inspector General

Inspection Report
ARC's J-1 Visa Waiver Program
In Alabama

The Appalachian Regional Commission

ARC

September 27, 2011

Report 11-09

Background

ARC adopted a J-1 Visa Waiver program under the U.S. Department of State (DOS) guidelines. The guidelines allow a hospital or other entity acceptable to the DOS to sponsor a foreign physician, and then for a governmental entity to submit a request for a 3 year Visa waiver on behalf of the physician. ARC's utilizes its member state governmental apparatus' to gather information and documentation from prospective J-1 Visa physicians. Upon ARC approval of a J-1 Visa request from the state, ARC submits a request to DOS. Upon DOS approval, ARC has responsibility for oversight of its program requirements, compliance, and reporting to DOS.

ARC policies require that the physicians provide primary medical care 40 hours a week in a "Health Professional Shortage Area" (a term defined by the US Public Health Service) of Appalachia as designated by ARC. In addition, ARC has requirements of physicians to help low income patients and other policies requiring the acceptance of health insurance, such as Medicare.

Purpose, Scope and Results

We visited the offices of three physicians granted J-1 Visa Waivers through ARC's program. The purpose of the visit was to assess program results and compliance with established rules. The offices of three physicians visited were in North Central Alabama; visits of the offices took place during the month of August 2011 and our work was conducted in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation,* issued by Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency in January 2011.

One physician worked in a family medical center that appeared to have a high degree of patient utilization. She expressed satisfaction with the program, her job, employer, and her interactions with patients. The office hours and requirements related to low income patients and insurances were being met.

Another physician we visited ran a psychiatric ward at a local hospital and also saw patients on an outpatient basis. Apparently, in the area of Psychiatry in this part of Alabama, there is a shortage of skilled physicians and ARC did well with this placement. The office hours and requirements related to low income patients and insurances were met, as described by the doctor.

The third physician visited specialized in pediatrics, and was on a seven week maternity leave that was soon to end. Her patients were being seen by another physician. Apparently the office is open the requisite number of hours.

We noted an inconsistency between ARC program language and that of Alabama involving the requirements to provide primary medical care. ARC policy states, "… The physician must agree to provide primary medical care... ", while Alabama's documents require the employer to provide, "Assurance that primary care or mental health physicians will provide… primary care or mental health care…" and indeed one physician is a mental health care provider. Clarification of the language to reflect actual practice eligibility is recommended. Overall, the J-1 Visa Waiver program in Alabama appears well received and utilized in the communities being served.