

Doctors for the Delta Program Bringing Foreign Doctors to Memphis Area

By: BECKY GILLETTE

Memphis has more flexibility to recruit international physicians to alleviate its doctor shortage than perhaps any metro area in the country, thanks to the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Doctors for the Delta program. As a result of that program, 25 foreign doctors have been placed to fill critical needs in the Memphis area, and another five in neighboring counties in Mississippi and Arkansas.

A surprisingly large number of foreigners attend medical school in the U.S.

"More than 25 percent of all doctors who train in U.S. are foreign," said Greg Siskind, a Memphis immigration lawyer with Siskin Susser, LLC, (www.visalaw.com).

"About half of those foreign doctors are on a J-1 Visa that requires them to go home for two years when they complete training. But doctors who decide to stay in the U.S. and are willing to serve in shortage areas can be sponsored for a waiver of their home residency requirement by a state health agency or a federal agency such as the DRA, which covers 250 counties in eight states. Downtown Memphis is one of the few metro areas in the DRA region. Two suburban counties, DeSoto in Mississippi and Quitman in Tennessee, are also designated as shortage areas."

States are limited to 30 J-1 physician waivers per year, but federal programs don't have that limit.

"The DRA can put as many doctors as needed in an area," said Siskind, who is author of the book *J-1 Guidebook*. "They have that flexibility."

Siskind, who works with the DRA to place physicians throughout the Delta region, said Memphis has some advantages attracting foreign doctors.

"You can live in a desirable metro area, practice your specialty, and deal with the waiver of having to go back to your home country," Siskind said. "A lot of times foreign doctors want to be near people from their home country or background\ethnicity. It is easier to find that in a metro area. That is one advantage of Memphis as opposed to smaller communities. Some doctors want very much to be in a larger city."

Siskind believes if more people knew about the program, they would be taking advantage of it.

"Even so, a number of doctors have used the program successfully," he said. "Quite a few doctors wouldn't have come

to Memphis without this program. It helps fit an important need for the community that otherwise might have been left unfilled. The DRA is very successful in helping communities get the doctors they need."

In addition to family care doctors, the DRA program can also place physicians in other specialties as needed. For example, Andreas Schwingshackl, MD, was granted a J-1 visa waiver in May 2009 to work as a pediatrician at Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center in Memphis.

The Doctors for the Delta program isn't just good for health, but also the economy. Pete Johnson, federal co-chair of DRA, said the number one underlying issue affecting the overall economy of the Delta is the health of its people.

"It affects every aspect of the Delta's ability to compete at the global scale because it cuts to the heart of our citizens' productivity," Johnson said. "Access to affordable health care and trained physicians is the most critical link we have in the health care delivery system in our region."

Johnson said they work closely with the states involved to ensure no unnecessary duplication or fragmentation of the processes necessary to bring about placing physicians in underserved areas.

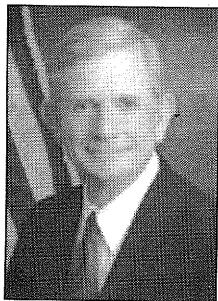
Memphis has been one of the most successful areas for the DRA program, Johnson said. Prior to the DRA program, Memphis was unsuccessful in getting any foreign physicians into the country through the state's Conrad 30 program.

West Memphis has been particularly well served.

"The Quitman County Hospital has said at public meetings that this has had a huge impact on their ability to deliver health care to people of Quitman County. That is exemplary of what we are doing throughout the region."

Johnson said the greatest challenge they have is ensuring foreign physicians assimilate into the community, and that they put down roots and want to stay after the two-year commitment is up.

"Of course, we at DRA can't control that so it is incumbent on the local community to do everything they can to ensure the physicians stay there," Johnson said.



Pete Johnson