May 18, 2006

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-773T, a testimony before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Claims, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

FOREIGN PHYSICIANS

Preliminary Findings on the Use of J-1 Visa Waivers to Practice in Underserved Areas

Why GAO Did This Study

Many U.S. communities face difficulties attracting physicians to meet their health care needs. To address this problem, states and federal agencies have turned to foreign physicians who have just completed their graduate medical education in the United States under J-1 visas. Ordinarily, these physicians are required to return home after completing their education, but this requirement can be waived at the request of a state or federal agency if the physician agrees to practice in, or work at a facility that treats residents of, an underserved area. In 1996, GAO reported that J-1 visa waivers had become a major means of providing physicians for underserved areas, with over 1,300 requested in 1995. Since 2002, each state has been allotted 30 J-1 visa waivers per year, but some states have expressed interest in more.

GAO was asked to report on its preliminary findings from ongoing work on (1) the number of J-1 visa waivers requested by states and federal agencies and (2) states' views on the 30-waiver limit and on their willingness to have unused waiver allotments redistributed. Such redistribution would require legislative action.

GAO surveyed the 50 states, the District of Columbia, 3 U.S. insular areas—the 54 entities that are considered states for purposes of requesting J-1 visa waivers—and federal agencies about waivers they requested in fiscal years 2003–05.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-773T.

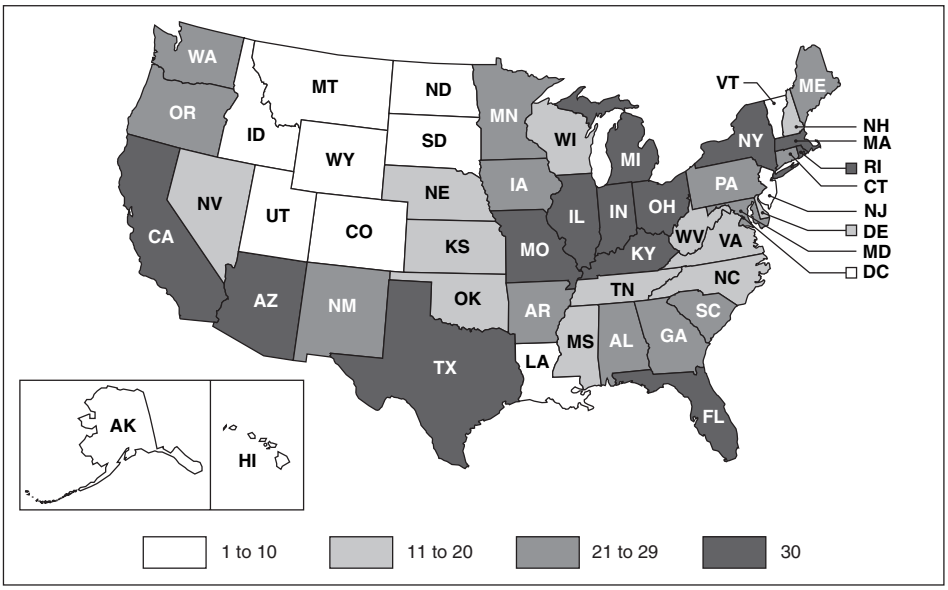
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Leslie G. Aronovitz at (312) 220-7600 or aronovitzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The use of J-1 visa waivers remains a major means of placing physicians in underserved areas of the United States. States and federal agencies reported requesting more than 1,000 waivers in each of the past 3 years. In contrast to a decade ago, states are now the primary source of waiver requests for physicians to practice in underserved areas, accounting for more than 90 percent of such waiver requests in fiscal year 2005. The number of waivers individual states requested that year, however, varied considerably. For example, about one-quarter of the states requested the maximum of 30 waivers, while slightly more than a quarter requested 10 or fewer.

Regarding the annual limit on waivers, about 80 percent of the states—including many of those that requested the annual limit or close to it—reported the 30-waiver limit to be adequate for their needs. About 13 percent reported that this limit was less than adequate. Of the 44 states that did not always request the limit, 25 reported that they would be willing to have their unused waiver allotments redistributed, at least under certain circumstances. In contrast, another 14 states reported that they would not be willing to have their unused waiver allotments redistributed. These states cited concerns such as the possibility that physicians seeking waivers would wait until a redistribution period opened and apply to practice in preferred locations in other states.

States' Requests for J-1 Visa Waivers for Physicians to Practice in Underserved Areas, Fiscal Year 2005



Sources: GAO survey of states (data), 2005; copyright © Corel Corp., all rights reserved (map).

Note: Guam requested two J-1 visa waivers in fiscal year 2005; Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands requested no waivers that year.