FOREIGN PHYSICIANS

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

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.