



Highlights of [GAO-07-52](#), a report to congressional requesters

# FOREIGN PHYSICIANS

## Data on Use of J-1 Visa Waivers Needed to Better Address Physician Shortages

### Why GAO Did This Study

Many U.S. communities face difficulties attracting physicians. To address this problem, states and federal agencies have turned to foreign physicians who have just completed graduate medical education in the United States under J-1 visas. Ordinarily, these physicians must return home after completing their programs, but this requirement can be waived at the request of a state or federal agency if the physician agrees to practice in an underserved area. In 1996, GAO reported that J-1 visa waivers had become a major source of physicians for underserved areas but were not well coordinated with Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) programs for addressing physician shortages. GAO was asked to examine (1) the number of waivers requested by states and federal agencies; (2) waiver physicians' practice specialties, settings, and locations; and (3) the extent to which waiver physicians are accounted for in HHS's efforts to address physician shortages. GAO surveyed states and federal agencies about waivers they requested in fiscal years 2003–2005 and reviewed HHS data.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Health and Human Services collect and maintain data on waiver physicians and use these data when identifying areas experiencing physician shortages and placing physicians in these areas. HHS concurred with GAO's recommendation.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-52](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-52).

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](mailto:aronovitzl@gao.gov).

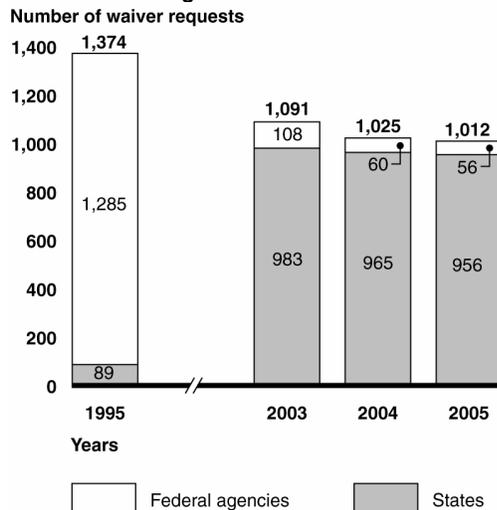
### What GAO Found

The use of J-1 visa waivers remains a major means of providing physicians to practice in underserved areas of the United States. More than 1,000 waivers were requested in each of fiscal years 2003 through 2005 by states and three federal agencies—the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority, and HHS. At the end of fiscal year 2005, the estimated number of physicians practicing in underserved areas through J-1 visa waivers exceeded the number practicing there through the National Health Service Corps (NHSC)—HHS's primary mechanism for addressing physician shortages. In contrast to a decade ago, when federal agencies requested the vast majority of waivers, states have become the primary source of J-1 visa waiver requests, accounting for 90 percent or more of waiver requests in fiscal years 2003 through 2005.

States and federal agencies requested waivers for physicians to work in a variety of practice specialties, settings, and locations. In fiscal year 2005, a little less than half of the waiver requests were for physicians to practice exclusively primary care. More than three-quarters of the waiver requests were for physicians to work in hospitals or private practices, and about half were for physicians to practice in rural areas.

HHS does not have the information needed to account for waiver physicians in its efforts to address physician shortages. Without such information, when considering where to place NHSC physicians, HHS has no systematic means of knowing if an area's needs are already being met by waiver physicians.

**J-1 Visa Waivers Requested by States and Federal Agencies, Calendar Year 1995 and Fiscal Years 2003 through 2005**



Sources: GAO/HEHS-97-26; GAO survey of states, 2005; GAO survey of federal agencies, 2005.

Note: "States" refers to entities eligible to request waivers under the authority granted to states, including the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.