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## Ellenville Exposure

Remember the TV show *Northern Exposure*, in which a small Alaskan town recruited a big-city doctor by helping to pay off his medical school loans? Well, fiction has become fact right here in the Valley, where — like Alaska — small communities are suffering from a serious lack of health-care providers. Playing the part of Cicely, Alaska, is Ellenville, Ulster County.

The Catskill Hudson Area Health Education Center (Catskill Hudson AHEC) has launched a new program called HealthMatch. Under the leadership of executive director Kathryn Reed, HealthMatch works with community leaders in health care, business, and government to recruit doctors, dentists, and other providers into their locale. The pilot community for this program is Ellenville.

The New York State Area Health Education Center system is a workforce development initiative established in 1998 to find solutions to the shortage of health-care workers, and the lack of diversity in the health-care workforce, in the more rural areas of the state. While the physician shortage is a national problem, it is even more acute in rural regions. Catskill Hudson AHEC, which serves 11 counties in the Valley and the Catskills, is one of nine AHEC centers statewide.

In 2007, Reed was involved in a focus group regarding health-care needs in Ellenville. "It became evident that community members were passionate about preserving their hospital and retaining local health care. That was the catalyst to developing this program," she explains. The funding for HealthMatch came from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the New York State Department of Health, and local grants. Local government officials, including Assemblymen Peter Lopez and Kevin Cahill, Assemblywoman Nancy Calhoun, and State Senator John J. Bonacic, were instrumental in acquiring those funds, Reed says. Local buy-in is critical for the program's success: It will be up to community leaders to sell the area's lifestyle and its benefits to newly minted primary-care doctors, and to provide the incentives (such as helping to pay off loans or subsidizing the start-up costs of establishing a practice). "I think they underestimate the geographic location of Ellenville. People from the outside see it as geographically isolated," says Reed, who notes that Ellenville is located in a valley between two mountain ranges. "But most don't realize you can have this great rural lifestyle, where you're not in the middle of all that urban hubbub." Plus, she notes, Ellenville has "a real sense of community," a vibrant cultural scene (including a professional theater), and a wide range of shops and services. And, with Kingston just 30 minutes away and Middletown even closer, the bigger stores and malls are also easily accessible.

In effect, Reed and her staff of four are matchmakers. She knows that finding the right doctor for the right community is tricky. But if Ellenville successfully lures a new M.D. to town, Reed hopes to roll HealthMatch out to the rest of her service area and, eventually, throughout the state. She has no doubts it will work. "I am convinced we will get it done," she says. "If we can place one or two doctors a year, I will feel like we have made a difference."