

What the Heck is AHEC?

Even if you have heard about the AHEC program, you probably don't know what it means, or what it does. Although the program is 30 years old, spans the area from Maine to Palau and helps hundreds of thousand people a year, few know what it is.

AHEC stands for Area Health Education Center and it is a federal grant funded program through the U.S. Government's Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions (BHP). The BHP "encourages health professionals to serve individuals and communities where the need is greatest, and promotes cultural and ethnic diversity within the health professions workforce. The Bureau of Health Professions has validated two approaches to health professions training that significantly increase the number of graduates choosing careers caring for underserved people:

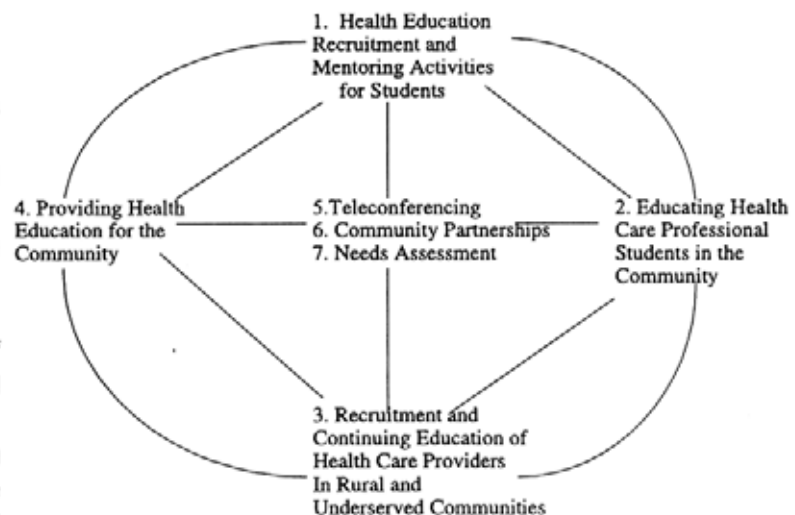
- Increase the diversity of health professions students
- Focus on the primary care disciplines and expose students early and throughout their training to clinical practice in underserved areas."¹

Emphasis is placed on recruitment of students to health careers, community based interdisciplinary training in underserved areas, cultural competency training and maintaining skills for providers in rural areas. Grants can be submitted by U.S. medical schools and funded based on peer review scores. Grant funding cycles are three years, however annual renewal depends upon the U.S. Congress allocating funding for AHEC within Title VII or the Public Health Service Act for every fiscal year. More information regarding federal mandates and funding can be obtained at www.hrsa.gov; www.nationalahec.org; <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/42/294a.html> and <http://www.aamc.org/advocacy/library/laborhhs/labor0002.htm>.

The University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine began an AHEC Program in 1995. The mission of the Hawaii AHEC is to improve the health of the underserved through education. The first AHEC center in Hawaii was the Ke Anuenue (Rainbow) AHEC in Hilo, on the Big Island of Hawaii in 1995. This AHEC provides health professions education, community

capacity building programs, health education, continuing education and video teleconferencing to the people of Maui and Hawaii Counties. In 1997, the Na Lei Wili (Intertwining Leis) AHEC opened on the Island of Kauai and provides recruitment to health professions programs, interdisciplinary community based health education, continuing education and community education services to the communities of Kauai and Oahu. In 2000, the Palau AHEC opened with the primary goal of providing primary care and public health post graduate residency training.

Although every AHEC Center is unique, they all share general areas of activities that relate to the Bureau of Health Professions goals. In Hawaii, we have identified



seven areas of activities that are interrelated and symbolized in the Cycle of Aloha:

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1. Recruitment and health education activities are conducted for students from kindergarten through college. Peer mentoring and group activities are employed to interest students in health careers, particularly students

from underrepresented minority groups and rural areas.

2. Once students enter health professions schools, AHEC provides community based training in areas designated as rural and medically underserved. Much of this training is in interdisciplinary teams at community health centers.

¹ Bureau of Health Professions web page: <http://lbhpr.hrsa.gov/>. May 23, 2002

3. Once students graduate, they are recruited to practice in rural and medically underserved areas. Continuing education and teaching opportunities are provided to health care workers to keep their interest and skill level high.

4. Direct community based education is provided in communities.

5. Video teleconferencing modalities are utilized for community health education, recruitment activities and health care professional education.

6. Community partnerships expand the scope of programs and pool resources. They are vital to the success of AHEC Programs.

7. Needs assessments are performed, such as a health workforce needs assessment recently conducted in Hawaii.

Each of these seven areas impact and strengthen the other areas. For example, when a health professions student spends at least 7 weeks working in an underserved area, they not only learn about the beauty of that community and help their patients and preceptor by searching the literature for the answers to medical questions, but they also may provide community health education and recruitment activities for students. Health education activities within communities provide education not only for community members, but education on how providers can better care for patients in these communities. Video teleconferencing can be utilized for medical education, continuing education and community based health education.

Although the Hawaii AHEC program is too young to measure the impact on health indicators in Hawaii, and especially in the Pacific Basin, there are a number of successful outputs to date:

- The Hawaii AHEC program has raised more than \$10,000,000 in federal and local grants for health education activities since 9/30/95.
- Since 1999, the Hawaii AHEC has trained 1366 health professions students in community based medicine and cultural competency, and performed health

careers recruitment activities for 10545 students from kindergarten through college.

- Twenty four AHEC program completers currently provide health care in medically underserved areas.

- Since 1999, the Hawaii AHEC has performed community based health education for 5,089 community members in 12 underserved communities.

- The Hawaii AHEC provides continuing education to over 500 health care workers a year.

- The Hawaii AHEC has assisted 6 communities with development of community learning centers and health education programs.

- The Hawaii AHEC has performed a statewide health workforce needs assessment and a survey of video teleconferencing infrastructure. Both results are listed on the AHEC webpage.

- The Hawaii AHEC has assessed the video teleconferencing resources in the state and identified 64 service locations. Usage and contact information are listed on the webpage at www.ahec.hawaii.edu/vtc. Hawaii AHEC is currently performing VTC sessions for health education at 22 of these locations.

- In September of 2000, the Hawaii AHEC partnered with the Republic of Palau and Palau Community College to open an AHEC Center. Currently the Palau AHEC Center is providing residency education to thirteen medical officer physicians from Palau, Yap and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. And this is just the beginning (see Dr. Dever's article on page...)

For more information on the Hawaii/Pacific Basin AHEC Program please visit our website at www.ahec.hawaii.edu. For more information on the National AHEC Organization please go to www.nationalahec.org. For more information on the Health Resources and Services Administration, please visit www.hrsa.gov. For information on the HRSA programs, mandates and legislative funding please see: <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/42/294a.html> or <http://www.aamc.org/advocacy/library/laborhhs/labor0002.htm>.

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