An informal group of 20 to 24 lawmakers in Wisconsin will concentrate its efforts in 2017 on proposals to boost the state’s supply of rural health care workers and services. The Rural Wisconsin Initiative unveiled its legislative agenda during the latter part of 2016.

The new package of bills includes:

- a $750,000 annual grant program, with preference given to rural hospitals that partner with educational institutions to form training programs for advanced practice clinicians (nurse practitioners and physician assistants, for example); funding would be used to create the educational infrastructure needed for the training, as well as provide for tuition assistance and stipends for living expenses;
- a one-time $500,000 grant for the creation of wellness facilities or programs in rural areas (funding would be available to communities with a demonstrable need where matching funds are available); and
- a $250,000 annual grant program that would be available to hospitals and educational entities that form training partnerships focused on allied health professionals such as dental hygienists, radiographers, physical therapists, nutritionists and respiratory therapists.

Other legislative priorities include helping rural hospitals set up compliance and “best practice” programs, as well as requiring the state to conduct biannual surveys that pinpoint shortages in the health care workforce — where they are occurring and in what occupations.

“Most of the proposals … in the overall light of a $30 billion to $40 billion budget, aren’t going to be deal-breakers,” says Ed Brooks, who helps lead the Rural Wisconsin Initiative.

And the group notes that having a solid base of health care workers and services is essential to a rural community’s ability to attract and retain a vibrant population. For example, businesses, young families and senior citizens all make decisions on where to locate or live based in part on access to quality health care.

The Rural Wisconsin Initiative also will push for more funding for the state’s Physician Residency Assistance Program.

Established in 2010 by state legislation, the program provides grants and technical assistance in order to establish medical residencies in underserved and rural communities. It helped fund 93 percent (77 of 83) of Wisconsin’s rural residency programs in 2015.

The Rural Wisconsin Initiative convened early in the state’s 2016 legislative session to train a spotlight on rural concerns. It then quickly introduced a package of eight bills to improve access to health care, education, technology, and workforce opportunities.