



Media Contact:
Russ Rhea (512) 344-2030

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Texas Health Care Organizations Endorse Bipartisan Plan to
Address Primary Care Shortage**

*Doctors and clinic administrators join authors of House Bill 1876 at the Texas Capitol
to urge lawmakers to support health care access measure*

AUSTIN, Texas - March 23, 2009 - The Texas Association of Community Health Centers (TACHC) today joined with the Texas Academy of Family Physicians (TAFP) in calling on members of the House Committee on Public Health to support House Bill 1876 when the legislation is heard in committee next week. Calling the bill critical to the future of health care across Texas, the two associations strongly endorsed the proposal aimed at increasing the number of primary care physicians, dentists and other health care providers practicing in rural and underserved communities.

HB 1876 by Rep. Warren Chisum (R-Pampa) and Rep. Richard Raymond (D-Laredo) would consolidate and unify the state's existing loan repayment programs under one umbrella and significantly increase the funding available. Physicians, dentists and other health care providers who agree to practice in medically underserved communities could receive up to \$160,000 in loan repayments over four years of service.

During an event today at the Texas Capitol, Representatives Chisum and Raymond were joined by doctors and health care center administrators from across Texas to urge passage of the legislation.

"We must address the shortage of primary care providers in our state today because the consequences are only worsening for those seeking care and for every taxpayer," said Rep. Chisum. "Any delay brings longer waits for those seeking care, as well as a mounting toll on property taxpayers who are forced to subsidize more expensive emergency room care."

"The shortage of family physicians, nurse practitioners, dentists, and mental health providers is not unique to any one region of our state," said Rep. Raymond. "This is not just a border issue or rural issue. The consequences are being seen statewide. We must provide the right incentives to help recruit and retain needed health care professionals and HB 1876 does that."

HB 1876 would establish the Texas Health Care Access Fund. For family care physicians, nurse practitioners, dentists, psychologists and other selected health care professionals locating in areas of great need, the Fund would be available to assist in paying off student loans.

Medical students graduate with debt that averages up to \$160,000, which causes many to eschew careers in primary care in favor of more lucrative specialties. The number of U.S. medical students entering family medicine residency positions has dropped by more than half over the last 10 years. The Health Care Access Fund would provide an incentive to new health professionals to locate in critical shortage areas throughout Texas.

-more-

“Texas faces a current and impending shortage of physicians – particularly primary care physicians – to meet the health care needs of our growing population,” said Tom Banning, TAFP CEO/Executive Vice President. “If Texas is going to address skyrocketing health care costs and improve access to care, we must rebuild our dwindling primary care workforce - loan repayment is a small but significant step in the right direction.”

More than half of Texas counties are in need of primary care physicians. In 2008, 26 Texas counties had no primary care physician. More than 110 Texas counties – rural and urban – have been designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas, meaning those counties do not meet a minimum national threshold of one physician for every 3,500 people.

In addition to providing incentives for health care providers, the Texas Health Care Access Fund would also provide support for federally-qualified health centers across Texas. Such support would be critical as new health providers and services are established in shortage areas.

“Our clinics throughout Texas are on the front lines of providing care, and many are struggling to deal with patient demand because primary care providers are scarce,” said José E. Camacho, TACHC Executive Director. “Healthcare that is delayed means healthcare that is denied. And in many parts of our state, people are being forced to wait months for basic preventative care – or simply go without. HB 1876 is a common sense answer to a problem that will only grow worse.”

By 2015, Texas will need more than 4,500 additional primary care physicians and other providers to care for the state’s underserved population, predicted to be 5.3 million people.

The bill would pay for the additional loan repayment funding by changing the way some tobacco products are taxed. Currently, the tax on smokeless tobacco products is based on price, not unit. Price variability on these products creates a tax loophole that promotes the use of cheap smokeless tobacco and deprives the state of excise tax revenue.

Other organizations that have endorsed HB 1876 include the Coalition for Nurses in Advanced Practice, the National Association of Social Workers – Texas Chapter, the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, the Texas Hospital Association and the Texas Dental Association.

HB 1876 is scheduled for hearing before the House Public Health Committee on Tuesday, March 31, 2009. For more information regarding HB 1876 and the primary health care provider shortage in Texas, visit www.healthaccessfortexas.org.

###