SHARON – Seven medical students got an introduction to rural health care during a two-week stay aimed at wooing them to practice in small towns.

For the second year in a row, the Community Foundation for Health has sponsored the program that brings young men and women to the area for a firsthand look at the benefits of working in rural locales. They shadowed employees at Sharon Hospital, Hudson River Healthcare in New York state and Geer Nursing and Rehabilitation Center and Mountainside, a drug and rehabilitation center, both in Canaan. On Wednesday, they gathered for a dinner and to hear why four local physicians chose to settle in the Northwest Corner.

Gertrude O'Sullivan, the foundation's director of communications and special programs, noted the shortage of practitioners in the area and the wonderful alliances that were formed among many groups to make the program, which has no budget, possible. Medical schools cooperated and lodging and food were provided by
Indian Mountain School. Many businesses provided the students gift certificates and other items.

The students attending from Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine in Middletown, N.Y., were Mohammed Shilleh of Kingston, N.Y., Saran Patel of Lancaster, Penn., Shubhdeep Ahden of Toronto, Carly Rice of Wurtsboro, N.Y. and Aaree Lee of Queens, N.Y. Those from Quinnipiac University in Hamden were David Turco of Westerly, R.I., and Sagar Desai of New City, N.Y.

All expressed enthusiasm about what they’d seen during the two-week stay and while they are far from deciding where they’ll eventually set up their practices, they were very impressed with the facilities they toured and the people they met.

Four doctors spoke to the students about practicing in a rural area. Gene Chin, an emergency room doctor at Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington, Mass., and a foundation board member, said he went to school in the Boston area and had no intention of coming to a small town until he spent time in Alaska after his residency. “That became a lifestyle for us. In small towns, you really get to know your colleagues. The lifestyle is wonderful; safe and comfortable.”

Kristin Newton, a family practitioner in Kent, chose a residency in Maine because of its rural nature. She served a huge geographic area. “You really have to take a look at what kind of life and the types of relationships with your patients you want. In rural areas like this, patients really appreciate their doctors. You are the point of action for them.”

John Charde, a retired pediatrician, worked in the areas of chronic care and geriatrics. He said neither an urban or suburban setting was suitable for him when starting out. “Bringing information from other areas to rural areas is important. And it’s a great place to raise kids.” Charde, who has been in the Northwest Corner for 47 years, said the one thing he and his colleagues had to do early on was establish relationships with large hospitals and specialists.

Bill Gallup, a retired pediatrician, was looking for a rural place and a group practice so his personal life would be less stressful. He found a three-member practice at the former Sharon Clinic.

“You have the joys of seeing how well you can keep patients,” Gallup said. “While the area is affluent with many people having second homes here, there are pockets of poverty. Even giving free care can be quite satisfying.”

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