After a successful first year pilot in 2010, the Georgia Rural Medical Scholarship Program in Washington County is beginning to see results. The program has expanded the number of core and elective rotations offered while also capturing the interest of many students at Mercer University and other medical schools in Georgia.

In 2009, the Washington County Archway Partnership Health Committee identified “increasing access to health care professionals” as a top priority. The committee worked with the Georgia Statewide Area Health Education Centers Network (AHEC) to establish the Georgia Rural Medical Scholar Program (GRMSP).

The establishment of this program required building a bridge between various medical schools in Georgia, local physicians, and hospitals. Mercer University School of Medicine (MUSM) was approached by the Archway Partnership and Washington County officials to create a collaborative effort. Students will be able to complete several required clinical rotations with local private practices and Washington County Regional Medical Center to experience a rural healthcare environment in addition to the medical campus setting.

A critical aspect of this program is the repeat exposure to the same community through these rotations which take place over their four years of medical school. Students are able to make strong professional and social connections. To ensure these students fully experience a professional and social life in Washington County, housing is provided free of charge and a special effort is taken by local volunteers to include students in social and civic activities. Each rotation is structured as a two to six week period within their first, third, and fourth years of medical school.

Ree Garrett, the Director of Development and Physician Recruiting, said “The Georgia Rural Scholar Program has the potential to provide Washington County with much needed doctors to our rural community. The clinical experience medical students receive through the program is invaluable to their training and the time they spend in our hospital and community provides us the unique opportunity to “sell” them early in their medical training on the benefits of returning to live and work in Washington County.”

During the first year of the program, eight students from Mercer elected to do a rotation in Washington County. Internal Medicine was the only rotation offered, but the program has expanded the number of core and elective options as well as the number of clinical rotation sites to Johnson and Wilkinson Counties. With the increase in rotation sites and the benefits since 2010, the GRMSP has maintained a student return rate of over 60 percent.

“You’re not having to compete with residents and other students for attention when there,” said Caitlin Collier, a pilot student from Mercer who elected to do several more rotations last year. “If I could have done my Pediatrics and Family Medicine rotations there, I would have.”

The benefits to this collaboration are three-fold. Students have the unique opportunity to be in a rural healthcare setting several times over their medical school career with individualized attention from healthcare professionals. They are also exposed to potential job sites early in their career and the county receives the benefit of having students practice in their area with the hope that they may join local clinics in the future. The program has maintained strong relationships with MUSM’s Macon and Savannah campuses and is now exploring opportunities for the medical students attending Georgia Health Sciences University’s Medical College of Georgia at the Southeast Georgia Clinical Campus.

Community members and local organizations have shown their support for the program through a fundraiser in 2011 called “Lock, Stock, and Barrel”. With over 200 people in attendance, enough funds were raised to sustain the program for two years. The Lock, Stock and Barrel will be held every other year to seek local support for the GRMSP. To further ensure sustainability the GRMSP Board of Directors was established in February 2011 and consists of physicians, community members who are passionate about the program, and representatives from AHEC.

**Advancing Community Priorities:** In 2007, community health was listed as a top priority in Washington County and in 2009 “increasing access to health care professionals” was added. Creating awareness while gaining and retaining health care professionals is a large step towards a healthier community. Through the Georgia Rural Medical Scholarship Program, the county gains access to the resources of some of the top health-care institutions in the state, while