



## Local doctor honored for safety net care

By Blake Jones

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GLENS FALLS - Fresh out of medical school in 1974, Dr. John Ruge got his start at a new health center in Chestertown, a rural area in need of accessible basic health services.

"The intention was to do something interesting for six months," Ruge said.

More than 30 years later, Ruge has built a network of 12 not-for-profit health centers within 3,700 square miles of the southeastern Adirondacks that continue to provide a safety net of basic care for rural residents.

Ruge, chief executive officer of the Hudson Headwaters Health Network in Glens Falls, was among 50 leaders statewide to receive a Social Impact Award from the New York Chapter of the AARP last week.

The AARP recognized Ruge for his years of providing care to residents and visitors alike, more than half of whom are uninsured or underinsured.

"Since 1974, Dr. Ruge has saved many lives and improved the quality of life for thousands," said Neal Lane of AARP's Executive Council.

When Ruge began his career, there were few medical facilities in the region, and many of the longtime physicians practicing in the Adirondacks were on the verge of retirement. At the time, community efforts were unsuccessful in persuading doctors to set up shop.

"It took several years to realize it wasn't a problem of one small town, it was a problem for the region," Ruge said.

While progress has been made over the decades, including the addition of 11 health centers, it's still hard to recruit primary care physicians to the region.

The need is most acute near Ticonderoga, Ruge said; but in time, that need will spread.

"It's pretty clear that in the next years, rather than decades, there are going to be retirements that are going to be a challenge (to providing care)," he said.

Other challenges facing the community health care network include lower insurance reimbursements in rural areas and an "enormously complex" billing system.

Over a 12-month period, the network mailed bills to 1,040 addresses for only a few hundred insurers, Ruge said.

Ruge continues to advocate for incentives to recruit physicians to upstate New York, as well as parity in insurance reimbursements for basic health services in rural areas.

He said he measures the organization's success in terms of feedback from patients and staff, and in terms of the efficacy of care provided.

"I'd like to think that Hudson Headwaters fills an important role for people without coverage and lots of people with coverage," Ruge said.