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2007 COUNTRY DOCTOR OF THE YEAR “UNRETIRES” TO SAVE RURAL HOSPITAL

81-Year-Old Physician Works Around the Clock to Maintain Care

IRVING, TEXAS -- In December, 2006, Pike County Memorial Hospital in rural Murfreesboro, Arkansas had three physicians on its staff. By January, 2007, it had none. The only hospital in the county and the second largest employer in town was faced with imminent closure.

That's when 81-year-old Hiram T. Ward, M.D. volunteered to come out of retirement and provide medical coverage for the hospital seven days a week, 24 hours a day. For single-handedly saving the hospital, and for his more than 45 years of dedication to rural medicine, Dr. Ward has been named recipient of the 2007 Country Doctor of the Year Award.

Presented by Irving, Texas-based Staff Care, the largest temporary physician staffing firm in the United States, the Country Doctor of the Year Award recognizes the spirit, skill, and dedication of American's rural medical practitioners. Staff Care has presented the national award since 1992 to exemplary primary care physicians practicing in communities of 20,000 or less.

According to Staff Care president Joseph Caldwell, Dr. Ward approached the local hospital when it became clear the facility would have to close due to lack of physician services. Though he had been retired for nine years, Dr. Ward agreed to do whatever it took to keep the hospital open. For seven months he was on call around the clock, seven days a week while seeing 30 to 40 patients a day at a nearby clinic. For the last several months, a part-time physician has been coming to Murfreesboro to help cover the hospital, but Dr. Ward still provides weekend coverage for the hospital while maintaining clinic hours three days a week.

“What Dr. Ward did was prevent the ‘doctor domino effect’ that is increasingly common in rural America today,” notes Caldwell. “First a small town loses its doctors, then it loses its hospital. That starts a downward spiral from which some small communities never recover.”

Dr. Ward has literally been a lifesaver, says Rosemary Fritts, administrator of Pike County Memorial Hospital. Due to his efforts, the hospital has been able to save the lives of two to three patients a month, most recently a local school teacher who Dr. Ward stabilized after she suffered a heart attack.

Dr. Ward's contributions to Murfreesboro date back to 1953, when the World War II veteran set up practice in his home town. There was no hospital in the community at that time and Dr. Ward performed home deliveries while serving as the town's only doctor. A visit to his office then cost \$2, while a house call, at \$3 a pop, was "considerably more expensive," Dr. Ward observes.

As the 2007 Country Doctor of the Year, Dr. Ward will be able to enjoy two weeks of time off, as Staff Care will provide a temporary physician to fill in for him at no charge, a service valued at approximately \$10,000. He also will receive the award's signature plaque featuring a country doctor making his rounds on a horse and buggy, an engraved stethoscope, and a monogrammed lab coat. Additional information about the Country Doctor of the Year Award can be found at www.countrydoctoraward.com.

About Staff Care

Staff Care® is the largest temporary physician staffing firm in the United States and a division of AMN Healthcare®, the nation's largest health care staffing company.