



Drawing the Doctors of Tomorrow

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BayCare Plans to Further Expand Residency Program

by RYAN MIEJCZAK

Throughout Florida and the nation, there's a significant physician shortage that creates barriers to health care for many. To help meet the demand for new physicians, BayCare plans to increase its residency positions to more than 650 by 2029.

To learn more about this new initiative, we sat down with Dr. Nathan Falk, founding Family Medicine Residency Program Director for the Florida State University College of Medicine and the family medicine residency program at the BayCare Health System in Winter Haven.

"The family medicine residency program was really first thought of by Winter Haven Hospital personnel before they joined BayCare 10 years ago," Falk says.

“It was the dream and initiative of the people at Winter Haven Hospital to try and bring physicians into the area by training them locally. We know that the number one predictor of where someone will practice after they graduate from their residency program is the location of that program.”

The whole nation has been hit by physician shortages, but Florida and Polk County are especially hard hit. While the national average is about 90 primary care physicians per 100,000 people, Polk county has only 50 primary care physicians per 100,000 people. That’s why the program is especially important for the Central Florida region.



Falk

“We know we have a significant physician shortage particularly in primary care in Polk County, which has only been compounded with our rapid growth here over the last several years,” Falk says.

“So this is a really important program for being able to increase access to primary care in our county. If you look at the county’s community health needs assessment over the last decade or so, the top three items have consistently been access to primary care, access to mental health care, and food security.”

BayCare already has various residency programs, including a family medicine program at Morton Plant hospital in Clearwater and a pediatrics residency program at St. Joseph’s Children’s Hospital in Tampa. Winter Haven Hospital’s family residency program, which onboarded its first class in 2020, is already seeing success.

“Here in Polk County, all the programs are academically sponsored by Florida State in collaboration with BayCare and Winter Haven Hospital,” Falk says.

“We first started the family medicine residency program in 2018, and we saw our first class onboarded in the summer of 2020. We graduated our first class in the summer of 2023. Of that first class, we graduated five individuals, and four out of the five stayed here in Polk County to practice, with the fifth one going to Orlando. So all five of them stayed in Central Florida.”

With the expansion of this initiative, they will be bringing on an additional two residents for the next class, as well as 13 new residents for a one-year transitional program.

“(The transitional) program is one that people will do as a traditional internship before they go into residency programs for specialties like radiology, dermatology, anesthesia, ophthalmology, radiation oncology, physical medicine, and rehabilitation.”

Students in this residency program will receive a quality education, learning the essential skills needed to be great physicians.

“For the family medicine residency program, they have three years to learn everything they need to be someone’s full scope family physician,” he continues.

“They rotate at the hospital where they provide inpatient care, they work in the ICU at Winter Haven Hospital, and they also learn in a variety of other clinics.”

Falk says they also do rotations with Central Florida Health Care, where they get outpatient pediatrics, gynecology, and infectious disease training.

“The transitional year students do a lot of the same stuff. They don’t do obstetrics, but they come and do inpatient hospital medicine, ICU emergency medicine, etc., and have a chance to rotate through a lot of different places and get exposure there.”

Falk foresees this initiative providing countless benefits to communities here in Polk County.

“We’re providing the next generation of physicians in our area. We know that we’ve got a number of physicians here that are nearing retirement age that we’re going to have to replace, not to mention the expanding population. Plus the economic impact of bringing in, by the time we’re all said and done next summer, 37 physician trainees and an additional eight faculty positions to support that.”

That, in turn, will be an economic boon for the county as well, he continues, from these people buying houses, renting apartments, buying vehicles, and buying other groceries and goods.

“We do other things out in the community, like health fairs and volunteering at one of the local art festivals where we teach kids and families about nutrition and hygiene through art projects,” Falk says.

“So, we’re really trying to be out in the community and helping people with their health, and making sure they’re plugged in and getting the care they need.”
