

Program aims to deal with doctor shortage in Polk County

New program to offer healthcare for uninsured

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WINTER HAVEN, Fla. - Staff at Winter Haven Hospital are teaming up with Polk County leaders and other local healthcare providers to help deal with a shortage of primary care doctors.

The hospital plans to start its first residency program specifically aimed toward training family medicine physicians.

This came after the Winter Haven Hospital Foundation, Polk State College, Central Florida Health Care and other clinics and foundations began an extensive study to see if such a graduate medical educational program would help improve primary care access within the county.

The study proved it would.

The US Department of Health and Human Services ranks Polk County as a Health Professional Shortage Area for Primary Care Physicians.

The county also has one of the largest uninsured populations in the state.

Participants in the program would train and provide medical care for uninsured patients as well as people with little access to a primary care physician.

“The residents or the students see patients that are underserved so those who don’t have any insurance, those who maybe have insurance where not a lot of people accept that insurance, maybe Medicaid” said Steve Nierman, President at Winter Haven Hospital, “so that’s a benefit to the community.”

Polk County Commissioners are set to vote on whether to approve the requested \$3.75 million grant to help build the facility, which would be located at the hospital's existing Behavioral Health site in Winter Haven.

The money would also help fund staff who would train six residents per year in a three-year program.

They hope at least half of every class will end up staying in Polk County for good.

"You just have to try it," said Nierman as to how he thinks they'll be able to attract residents to stay.

The hospital is currently in discussion with Florida State University College of Medicine to create a partnership, which shares a similar mission to train primary care physicians.

Once funding is approved, preparation will begin, with the goal of hosting their first class in 2019.

"You're providing better access for the physicians in training to the community in an underserved area as opposed to larger areas where they may have more doctors than they even needed," said Nierman.

Nierman thinks the training will also help with another problem; an influx of people going to emergency rooms for non-emergency related symptoms.

"People are coming for basic primary care," he said.

The goal is to treat some 14,000 patients a year during the program, who may have otherwise gone to an emergency room instead.

"We hope by implementing access to primary care that we'll see the emergency departments at all Polk County hospitals treating people with true emergencies," said Neiman.

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