Attempts to keep newly trained physicians in the Big Bend improved significantly Monday morning with the announcement of a new general surgery residency program at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare.

The program is the result of nearly eight years of planning, said TMH CEO Mark O’Bryant. This is the second residency program at TMH academically sponsored by Florida State’s 13-year-old College of Medicine, alongside the Internal Medicine Residency Program, launched in 2011. TMH also has a family medicine residency program.

Residency programs are vital because most physicians begin their medical careers near where they do their residency —no matter where the new physician is from or where he or she attended medical school.

“It will take several millions of dollars to bring this program to bear,” O’Bryant said. “Long-term for our community we’ll have a great training program around which to bring surgeons into our community. We’ll be able to create a wealth of general surgeons available not just to Tallahassee but to the state.”

The program won’t begin accepting medical school graduates until at least 2015.

Dr. Wade Douglas, a 1991 graduate of Florida A&M and a 1992 graduate of the FSU Program in Medical Sciences was named the program’s director after a nationwide search. Hospital officials said he should start July 1 with a salary of $450,000.

Douglas is currently the director of the general surgery residency program at the Edwards School of Medicine at Marshall University in West Virginia. He earned his medical degree at the University of Florida in 1995. He said he’s looking forward to coming back to the city where his medical education began.

“It is enriching to me to be back in the community where all of this started,” he said. “I’d like to see this program grow organically. It isn’t helpful to say we’d like to graduate four or five residents per year if we don’t have the support to educate four or five residents per year. We have to spend enough time within the community and see the actual educational opportunities.”

After his arrival in July, Douglas will begin working on developing the program and preparing to apply for accreditation through the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education.

The residency program should begin within the next two years, said Dr. Joan Younger Meek, FSU’s associate dean for graduate medical education. It is a five-year residency with two spots that will be available for students.

Between 2005 and 2013, slightly more than 10 percent of graduates from FSU’s College of Medicine chose
general surgery residencies, according to the school’s 2013 annual report. Younger Meek said nationally about 65 percent of medical school graduates leave the state they studied in to chase new residency programs.

About 30 percent of FSU’s medical school graduates do general surgery residencies in the state.

Now, 109 of FSU’s 680 medical school graduates practice medicine in Florida after completing school. Younger Meek said this program should keep physicians in the Big Bend.

“We do have a fair number of our graduates who are interested in general surgery and most of them are going out of state for their residencies,” she said. “We don’t have enough of those slots available in Florida. Hopefully this will increase the number of physicians and general surgeons in the area.”

It should cost about $950,000 over the next 17 months to launch the program, said TMH’s chief communications officer Warren Jones. The figure includes Douglas’ salary and additional costs for other employees, like a program coordinator.

“It’ll take us five years to graduate our first class of residents,” Douglas said. “Hopefully we’ll be able to get them into the community or into fellowship programs — whatever they desire.”