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CAPE CORAL

Lee Health, FSU partnering to bring residency program to Cape Coral to introduce new physicians

Luis Zambrano Fort Myers News-Press

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Editor's note: *An earlier version of this story misspelled Dr. Venkat Prasad's name.*

Lee Health is teaming up with Florida State University College of Medicine to bring an internal medicine residency to Cape Coral Hospital.

Dr. Venkat Prasad, chief medical officer for population health and physicians services at Lee Health, said that Lee Health wants to continue to invest in Cape Coral as the city continues to grow.

"Having a robust primary care network is very critical," Prasad said. "To serve our Cape Coral communities better, I think it is very important for us to have that investment and resource available in Cape Coral."

The program is a first for the city, and the program's director is excited for the big investments coming to Cape Coral.

Dr. Maja Delibasic, internal medicine specialist and associate professor at Florida State University College of Medicine, will lead the residency program with a team of five other FSU faculty physicians to provide instruction and patient care.

"This community vibe in the hospital and different patient population makes the (Cape Coral) hospital really attractive for a training program," Delibasic said.

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A medical residency program is a period of training for newly graduated medical students with a doctor's degree in medicine or osteopathy.

"I definitely think the community will benefit from the residency program because in addition to doing inpatient rounds and taking care of the patients in the hospital, each and every resident has to have a significant outpatient exposure," Delibasic said.

The internal medicine residency will be a three-year program at Cape Coral Hospital that will have 12 residents per program year for a total of 36 internal medicine residents.

"We are training them to either become primary care physicians or maybe they will decide to join inpatient medicine and then purely in the inpatient setting, or they may have to undergo further training so to join some of the fellowships," Delibasic said.

The program is a part of Lee Health's big investment into Cape Coral Hospital and other areas in the city.

They are investing \$150 million in Cape Coral for things like a Lee Health West Cape, the internal medicine residency program, and other service expansions like more critical care beds.

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The residency program is a part of addressing a physician shortage in Southwest Florida, according to Lee Health.

"When they graduate, some of them will go into the specialty fellowship training, Some of them will hopefully go to primary care and hospitalist medicine, and our goal is to try and retain them within the Southwest Florida communities," Prasad said.

According to census data, Lee County's population is 760,822, a 23% increase from 2010.

Besides population growth, other factors leading to a shortage of doctors include doctor burnout and the mental health toll from the pandemic, which has led to many physicians stepping down.

The financial cost of burnout is estimated at between \$2.6 billion and \$6.3 billion annually, according to a 2019 study published by the Annals of Internal Medicine. Turnover and reduced productivity were also accounted for in that study.

Recruiting one physician could cost health care employers up to \$1 million, according to Dr. Terrence McWilliams, a director with the national health care consulting firm, HSG.

The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates that the U.S. will experience a shortage of up to 124,000 physicians by 2034.

At a September meeting, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, a nonprofit private council that evaluates and accredits medical residency and internship programs in the U.S., announced that Cape Coral Hospital had received initial accreditation and approved recruitment of its first class.

According to Delibasic, the program already has over 1,500 applicants. Applications close in mid-December.

The top 25-30 applicants will be invited to Cape Coral in late January or early February for interviews to choose the first 12 residents.

The first class is scheduled to begin on July 1, 2022.

Prasad said that having an internal medicine residency is the start of creating more fellowships.

"If you have a primary care internal medicine residency on the campus, you can then offer fellowships in other medical specialties like gastroenterology, pulmonology, intensive care medicine, and infectious diseases," Prasad said.

Delibasic looks forward to the program residents engaging with the community through hospital services and community events like health fairs.

"I think everybody within the Cape Coral Hospital and the community is beyond positive and enthusiastic about the program opening in 2022," Delibasic said.

USA TODAY NETWORK-Florida health reporter Liz Freeman contributed to this report.