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Communities need primary care to thrive | Opinion

Dr. Elana Schrader and Dr. Anthony C. Speights Your Turn

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The pandemic changed many things in medicine, like the use and coverage of telemedicine for routine care. But it also exposed severe gaps in the U.S. health care system, including a critical lack of primary care doctors, nurses, and other health care providers.

Gone are the romantic days of a lone general practitioner caring for all the needs of a small community. Instead, our current health care system is a complicated web for patients and providers to navigate, and its success is incumbent on the primary care provider's enhanced role that extends beyond treating a patient's ills.

Today's primary care physicians (PCP) are focused on addressing health issues before they arise and serving as a coordinator for all their patients' needs by collaborating with specialists and other social and care experts.

This coordination is essential to help patients live their healthiest and meet health care's "triple aim" of (1) improving quality of care, (2) containing costs, and (3) improving the patient and family experience.

This week the health care community celebrates National Rural Health Day. While primary care doctors play a pivotal role, too many of our Big Bend communities do not have affordable, easy access to them. According to County Health Rankings, Leon County averages one PCP for every 1,100 residents while Wakulla has one per 3,000 and Gadsden has only one per 4,500.

Telemedicine has helped expand access for many, but rural communities lag behind due to the lack of broadband internet. And affordable health care options are often hard to find in these communities, leading to chronic conditions like diabetes

and high blood pressure becoming severe and even deadly when left untreated or mismanaged.

What's needed to increase access to quality, affordable comprehensive primary care? Collaboration.

For more than a decade, Florida Blue and its foundation have collaborated with Florida State University to increase health care access for rural and underserved populations, including establishing the Florida Blue Center for Rural Health Research and Policy at the FSU College of Medicine and several programs to increase the number of primary care physicians in underserved minority and rural communities.

Recently, Florida Blue partnered with Sanitas to build four new advanced primary care medical centers to support people in Tallahassee and surrounding communities. These centers will deliver affordable, high-quality care with no out-of-pocket costs for primary care visits, including free 24/7 virtual access to Sanitas doctors, for Florida Blue's members.

They will also connect people in the area to local social services and community resources through the Florida Blue Center in Tallahassee.

Investment in increasing access to affordable, comprehensive primary care and social support is an investment in the health of the entire community, and one that is needed for this region to truly thrive. We must encourage upcoming physicians to support the health and well-being of our rural and underserved communities. And, both public and private organizations must continue championing innovative partnerships that create more primary care capacity.

No single organization can address this issue. But together, we can ensure our rural and underserved neighbors get the access to health care they deserve.

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