

Editorial: Chipping away at a pending physician deficit

By The Editorial Board

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Last week The Senior List, a group that monitors issues affecting Baby Boomers and their elders, released a report on the availability of future medical care.

Using data compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Association of American Medical Colleges, the group plotted which states face a pending doctor shortage. The analysis considered the number of doctors now working in each state, the percentage of physicians approaching retirement and the ratio of medical school residents nearing the end of their education.

Overall America is expected to need roughly 120,000 new doctors by 2030. Digging down to each state's needs, Floridians are in rough shape.

Florida's best finish among the three categories — 25th place — was in the number of doctors per 100,000 residents. The Sunshine State placed 45th in the number of doctors nearing retirement age and 41st in the number of new physicians coming online.

Thus, overall, The Senior List ranked Florida seventh-worst in terms of being “in danger of having a doctor shortage in the years to come.”

A possible upside is that Florida is not alone. The Senior List notes that 35 states are below the threshold of achieving balance between doctors leaving the profession and new ones entering it.

Still, the downside for Florida is that the shortage is being driven by a combination of an aging population and the fact that, the report notes, “as more Americans have access to affordable healthcare, which is something a majority of Americans support, they will see doctors more often.” So, the prevalence of available care through Medicare and Medicaid, for instance, will create greater demand for doctors' services, which in time will translate to doctors opting to not accepting new patients, longer wait times for care and abandonment of rural areas for metro population centers.

Against this backdrop, applause is deserved for BayCare, which operates hospitals in Winter Haven and Bartow.

In February 2018, the hospital system and Florida State University's Medical School announced a partnership for a Polk County residency program. The move, modeled on FSU's initiatives in Tallahassee, Sarasota and Fort Myers, intends to bring 18 new medical school grads to Polk with the hope of keeping them here.

These doctors will practice family medicine. The first batch of six residents will start their three-year program in 2020. BayCare will add six additional residents over each of the next two years to reach 18 total by 2022.

In a recent editorial board meeting Steve Nierman, president of BayCare's Winter Haven Hospital, told us while hospital administrators would like all of them to remain in Polk, securing at least half will be a major plus.

The hospital is finishing construction of a new training clinic, recruiting faculty and will soon seek accreditation through the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, which operates a national matching program to attempt to recruit residents from around the country.

Dr. Nathan Falk, the medical director of the residency program, recruiting instructors is going well, several interested candidates are in the final stages of decision-making. “The goal is for three or four to join this year and another three to follow in 2020,” he told us in an email. “The total will be around seven physician faculty, in addition to Behavioral Medicine faculty to support Primary Care and Mental Health integration.”

Eighteen, or even nine, new doctors may not completely alleviate the pending doctor shortage facing Polk County, or Florida as a whole. But BayCare's program demonstrates we need more such innovative solutions to finding more doctors, and sooner rather than later.