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FSU, TMH and Apalachee Center plan new psychiatry residency program

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The Florida State University College of Medicine, Apalachee Center and Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare have signed an agreement to establish and operate a psychiatry residency program, addressing a critical area of need for the training of additional mental health-care providers for the region and state.

The program will be based at Apalachee Center, a Tallahassee-based organization that helps individuals recovering from emotional, psychiatric and substance abuse crises. It will provide three years of training in psychiatry for medical school graduates with the potential for adding additional fellowship opportunities in designated subspecialties.

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Among the subspecialties that could be offered are addiction medicine and child and adolescent psychiatry, two areas in need of additional providers locally and across the state and nation.

“Nearly one in five people in this country has some sort of mental health condition, often affecting their ability to work, their personal relationships and their ability to contribute to the community,” said FSU College of Medicine Dean John P. Fogarty. “Making matters worse, there aren’t enough psychiatrists to meet the need. This new program is overdue and is consistent with our mission to be responsive to community needs.”

Psychiatry is the fastest-growing medical specialty in the U.S., with 18 new programs accredited last year. Florida currently has 21 accredited psychiatry residency programs, but none in the Panhandle region. The nearest psychiatry residency program is in Gainesville.

Recruiting a director

The first step for the new program is recruiting a residency program director and applying for accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). The program could begin operations within 1-2 years.

“This region has made enormous strides in recent years toward increasing both access to and the quality of behavioral medicine,” said Jay Reeve, president and CEO of Apalachee Center. “However, we are still suffering from an acute shortage of psychiatrists, particularly those who are interested in working in the not-for-profit sector with uninsured and underinsured clients. The new psychiatric residency program will address that issue and ensure that our most vulnerable communities and citizens will have much greater access to vital psychiatric services.”

Medical school graduates are required to complete residency training in their chosen specialty in order to gain board certification and become independently practicing physicians. Psychiatry also requires that residents complete the first year of residency training in a different specialty. Many residents complete an initial year of training in internal medicine with some exposure to neurology and psychiatry during that year.

A long-term investment

“Establishing a psychiatric residency program is a vital step toward improving access to professional mental health care in our region,” Mark O’Bryant, president and CEO of TMH said.

“As with many of our previous and ongoing partnerships with the FSU College of Medicine and Apalachee Center, the psychiatric residency program is a long-term investment in our mission to transform care, advance health and improve lives within our community,” said O’Bryant. “Not only will those needing psychiatric care have access to the physician residents, the program will immerse the residents in our community with the hopes of recruiting many to practice in the Big Bend region full-time after completing their residency training.”

In addition to the existing shortage of psychiatrists, data from the Association of American Medical Colleges shows that nearly 60% of current psychiatry practitioners are 55 or older and nearing retirement age. The National Council for Behavioral Health reported in 2017 that by 2025, the shortage of psychiatrists in the U.S. may exceed 15,000 based on supply and demand calculations.

Retaining psychiatrists in Florida

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 111 million people already live in a mental health professional shortage area.

“The residency program in psychiatry will enhance the educational experience of College of Medicine medical students rotating in both core clerkships and elective experiences in psychiatry in Tallahassee,” said Dr. Joan Younger Meek, who directs the College of Medicine’s graduate medical education program and serves as dean of the medical school’s Orlando Regional Campus. “The program also will provide valuable experience in a residency program environment to those students considering psychiatry as a specialty choice.”

Psychiatry currently is the seventh-most selected specialty by FSU College of Medicine graduates entering residency, behind internal medicine, family medicine, pediatrics, emergency medicine, obstetrics-gynecology and general surgery.

Part of the effort to add new residency programs is to keep more Florida-educated physicians in the state for practice. About 60% of physicians end up practicing within an hour of where they completed residency training. In Florida, more than 60% of all graduating medical students end up leaving the state for their residency training, in part because of an insufficient number of available residency programs.

While Florida is the third-largest state in the country, it ranks in the bottom half among states for available residency slots per 100,000 people.

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