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Newtown clinic opens

By Jimena Tavel
Staff Writer

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When physician Karen Hamad addressed more than 100 guests Wednesday afternoon at the opening ceremony for a clinic in Newtown, her voice broke and her eyes welled up.

Hamad, associate director of the Florida State University College of Medicine Internal Residency Program at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, said she had dreamed of that moment for the past three years.

"I was overwhelmed," Hamad said. "It's a beautiful thing to see the community come together."

The clinic, named The Jean & Alfred Goldstein Health Center and located at 1825 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, was built for the hospital's graduate medical education program, which started July 1 and brought into town 13 residents for their specialty training in internal medicine.

The graduate program was developed to address the shortage of physicians in Florida, Hamad said. Over the next three years, the program will bring 39 doctors to Sarasota.

Shaded by a large white tent, Hamad spoke to a crowd gathered under a beating sun. Yet they smiled back at her. Among the guests stood Jean Goldstein, Mayor Shelli Freeland Eddie and Sarasota Police Chief Bernadette DiPino.

Hamad said the clinic will have a great impact in the Newtown community, which had no doctors' offices. Most residents have little access to healthcare.

Greg Carter, chairman of the Sarasota County Public Hospital Board, said Sarasota Memorial became a teaching hospital two years ago when it earned its accreditation, but it will officially start seeing patients this week.

"This is an important milestone for our health system, academic partner Florida State University's College of Medicine and the Newtown community," Carter said.

Carter said the program chose resident doctors who were mission-driven, meaning they identified with a cause like helping patients with HIV or volunteering at an orphanage.

Participating community organizations include Booker High School, which will bring in students to shadow doctors and lawyers at the facility, and the Good Samaritan Pharmacy, which will help patients get access to needed medicine.

Legal Aid of Manasota will provide free legal services to patients. For instance, if someone cannot pay for their electricity bill and their grandmother uses electricity because she needs oxygen for her health, the lawyers will intervene to prevent the electricity from being cut off.

And All Faiths Food Bank and the Newton Farmers Market will provide servings of fruits and vegetables, and low carbohydrate breads to patients with diabetes.

Talal Alkayali, a 27-year-old doctor who was born and raised in Syria and went to medical school in Jordan, is one of the 13 initial residents.

Alkayali volunteered to assist Syrian refugees with medication and food in Jordan, before leading colon cancer research for more than a year in California. He said he's excited to start seeing patients in Sarasota, which was his top choice. When he first toured the hospital, he said, he was greeted with smiles and quickly realized it would be a place where he would want to go to work rather than have to.

"When I came here, I thought, 'Oh, this is beautiful,'" Alkayali said. "It felt like home."