

# Opting in

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“A lot of people work their entire life for the opportunity to live here. We get paid to live here ... It’s almost like NFL match day.”

— Dr. Alfred C. Gitu, head of residency program at Lee Health

## Opting *in*

The next generation of family doctors is being trained by FSU’s Family Medicine Residency at Lee Health in Fort Myers

**BY EVAN WILLIAMS**

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The faces and work spaces of a Millennial generation of family doctors in Southwest Florida – people like Christine Norton, Lee Coghill and Ashley M. Clark – look as different from Rockwell’s image as the years between then and now. Each pursued their required three-year, post-medical school residency through the Florida State University Family Medicine Residency at Lee Health in Fort Myers.

As doctors there become acquainted with some of their first patients, they learn to provide “cradle to grave” care for all ages. The FSU-Lee Health Residency accepted its first group of six doctors in 2014, aiming to help fill a shortage of primary care physicians in Southwest Florida, with its growing and aging population, and to provide family-medical care for patients with the least access to care.



Above: Dr. Alfred C. Gitu is the FSU-Lee Health program director. Left: Dr. Lee Coghill and below left: Dr. Christine Norton.

VANDY MAJOR / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Dr. Norton, 28, is a second-year FSU-Lee Health resident from Lake Orion, Mich.

“I actually wrote I think in my second grade book I wanted to be a doctor,” she said.

At Wayne State University in Detroit, where she finished her M.D., she gravitated toward the broad scope of Family Medicine.

“I kind of liked a little bit of every rotation,” she said. “(We treat everyone from birth to death.”

An addition to becoming primary care physicians, Family Medicine residents may specialize in areas such as sports medicine or geriatrics.

Along with a jack-of-all trades training from the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at HealthPark Medical Center to the emergency room at Lee Memorial Hospital, the program also stresses one of the tenets of primary care: prevention.

Primary doctors address major health problems of patients today such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes and encouraging healthier lifestyles that cost less later on, sometimes through integrative care models that tie in behavioral and mental health.



Dr. Norton

“For the most part these conditions – can be controlled with lifestyle,” said Dr. Alfred C. Gitu, 48, the FSU-Lee Health program director. “The most inexpensive way to take care of everybody is preventative care.”

Dr. Gitu took over as head of the residency after being recruited by its founding director, Dr. Gary Goforth. Born and raised outside Nairobi, Kenya, he graduated from the University there before completing his own residency at Self Regional Healthcare in Greenwood, South Carolina. He lives with his wife Rebecca Chege in Fort Myers. They have two daughters.

His hope and an aim of the program is that many FSU-Lee Health residents will decide to stay and practice in the community after they complete the program.

Of the 18 Lee Health-FSU residency graduates so far, more than half have remained in the region. Ten remained in Southwest Florida while four others have found jobs in Sarasota, Tampa, Orlando and Pensacola.



Four of the doctors left the state. One pursued a Sleep Medicine fellowship at Stanford University, for instance, another a Sports Medicine fellowship in Ohio.

That’s similar to a national average found in a 2013 study of doctors listed by the American Medical Association. More than half of those who completed Family Medicine residencies

stayed to practice within 100 miles of their program.

The Lee Health-FSU Family Medicine Residency grew from accepting initially six residents per year to eight in 2017, narrowed down from 1,800 who applied for the program last year. There are currently 22 residents in the program.

Family Medicine doctors are well equipped to serve the needs of the area's underserved families who may have little or no medical insurance. A primary doctor is key for this group, in which other problems such as housing, finance, work, and education often supersede health care.

"I think primary doctors are important because preventative medicine is huge in maintaining health and well-being," Dr. Clark said. "If you don't have access to a family physician you're not going to have access to those opportunities for screening to find cancer early, or find diabetes early."

Dr. Norton

Now a second-year resident, Dr. Norton applied to programs in Michigan and Colorado, with FSU-Lee Health being her first choice. The hospital staff here, the weather, proximity to the beach, family in the area, and the residency's benefits were major factors for her. The program has a competitive salary of more than \$50,000 each year. Residents receive a housing stipend of \$500 per month. And the program covers malpractice insurance along with doctors' phone bills.



One of the biggest challenges for Dr. Norton has been adjusting to the increased hours compared to medical school, and keeping up to speed with the many areas of expertise required of a Family Medicine doctor.

"Your patients come to you with many questions," she said, requiring "a big breadth of knowledge."

Residents are typically not allowed to put in more than 80 hours per week. They are also counseled on wellness issues such as managing stress and making time for outside interests. Dr. Norton plays basketball, volleyball, kickball, the piano, and loves boating.

Her favorite part of the program is the people.

"I've definitely found some lifelong friends here, and lifelong mentors," she said.



Dr. Coghill

Dr. Coghill, 31, finished medical school at St. George's University School of Medicine in Grenada. After graduating from the FSU-Lee Health Residency he went on to complete its year-long Global Health Fellowship. He was since hired by Lee Health and works at area hospitals and with new members of the program.

"I tell the residents when they leave here, they can really manage anything," he said.

His fellowship in Papua New Guinea and Honduras included delivering babies and performing C-sections at hospitals, treating a young girl who had been in a car accident, and even helping with brain surgery. Dr. Gitu said he plans to grow the program with additional fellowship opportunities in the future.

The lovely Southwest Florida weather compared to his hometown of Toronto was a factor in his decision to stay, along with his wife, Kelsey, and their two children.

Dr. Coghill also appreciated the lack of other residency programs in town, a boon for a Family Medicine specialist because it gives him a greater chance of practicing and honing his full range of skills.

Managing his working life with family, church and community was one of his biggest challenges as a resident.

"It was really difficult to balance life and work," he said. "You have to work hard, but you also have to protect yourself from burnout."

Dr. Clark

After completing medical school at Drexel University in Philadelphia and graduating from the FSU-Lee Health residency in June, Dr. Clark, 29, joined Physicians' Primary Care of Southwest Florida.

Dr. Clark grew up in Pittsburg, Pa. She and her husband, Billy, have family who live here in the area. He was also able to find a job he enjoys as a teacher. Her residency interview sealed the deal.

"I just really fell in love with the program, the faculty, the other residents," she said. "So that's kind of what drew me in."

As with other residents, managing her workload and schedule was a challenge. For instance, over the course of a month a few different times during her residency, she'd work nights, then she would switch back to days.

She served as co-chief resident, a liaison between faculty and residents, and helped write their work schedules. Dr. Clark also served on quality improvement projects related to diabetes and falls in the elderly.

"We do see a lot of geriatric population down here and one of the biggest things we worry about is falls because it has a high morbidity and mortality rate," she said. |

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