



Polk County's supply of health care providers below state, national averages

By Marilyn Meyer

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It's not unusual to have to wait for a doctor's appointment in Polk County. The reason is simple, yet complex: there are far fewer physicians, dentists and other health care providers here than in more urban and wealthier parts of the state and nation.

Complicating the shortage issue, Polk County is looking toward a growth spurt projected to take the population from around 650,000 to almost 1 million people by 2040.

"Without a doubt, we as community partners need to keep recruiting," said Dr. Joy Jackson, director of the Florida Department of Health in Polk.

But local recruiting efforts are going to come up against competition as communities across the state deal with a profusion of physician retirements. The Florida Department of Health's annual report on physician workforce says two-thirds of Florida physicians are age 50 and older, Jackson said.

Citing statistics from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Rankings, Polk County's supply of primary care doctors, dentists and mental health professionals is far below national and state averages.

And comparing with the ideal – the top 10 percent of counties in the nation — Polk has about half the number of primary care physicians per capita, two-fifths the number of dentists and one-quarter the number of mental health providers.

Recruitment

"We have 20 physicians and are advertising for six more," said Ann Clausen, chief executive officer of Central Florida Health Care, a federally qualified community health clinic that over the past four years has doubled its clinic numbers, including 11 locations in Polk County.

"We have 17 advanced nurse practitioners and are advertising for five more; 11 dentists and advertising for four more; eight dental hygienists and advertising for one more; six pharmacists and advertising for one more plus auxiliary pharmacy staff; and we are advertising for seven licensed practical nurses," Claussen said.

And as Polk County's demographics become more diverse, "we want to mirror our patient population," Claussen said. Typically, the clinic is looking to hire multilingual staff — English and Spanish and/or Creole, she said.

And administrators at local hospitals all say they are continuously recruiting both primary care and various specialists and subspecialists.

Lakeland Regional Health Physician Group has grown by 100 percent in two years and now has 140 physicians and 81 advanced nurse practitioners and physician assistants, said Deana Nelson, senior vice president and chief strategy officer. That has translated into 10 percent growth in patient visits and a 20 percent growth in new patients, she said.

"Beyond that, we have nine new providers slated to start within five months and we have an ongoing list as we continue to recruit," Nelson said.

Still, said Steve Nierman, president of Winter Haven Hospital, "countywide, we are not anywhere close to recruiting what we need."

One way his hospital expects to have an impact is through its recent affiliation with Florida State University's Medical College setting up a primary care residency program. The first class of six will arrive in July 2020 for the three-year training program, with classes added the next two years so that eventually there will be 18 doctors-in-training on a continuing basis.

"The goal is 50 percent will remain in the community as practicing physicians in Polk County," Nierman said.

Lakeland Regional's efforts to set up a physician residency program have been underway for years but have been stymied by a technicality that Nelson said may be resolved soon through an amendment to federal legislation.

Training

Jackson said that in addition to the upcoming residency program or programs, other training programs are having an impact — from high school academies grooming students for health care fields to nursing programs at Polk State College and Florida Southern College.

"A lot of these things did not exist 10 years ago," Jackson said.

Ann Barnhart, chief executive officer of Heart of Florida Regional Medical Center in Haines City, pointed to the increasing role that advanced practice nurse practitioners are having in alleviating the problem of physician shortages.

"What I am seeing is that many of our nurses that were providing hospital-based care have gone on to get advanced practice licenses and are moving into the outpatient arena," she said. "They are being used as physician extenders and I think will have a greater presence in the future."

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