



Lifestyle

Polk's FSU medical residency program making positive impact on family medicine

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No need to wait until the first medical residents arrive to see a doctor at Florida State University College of Medicine's newest family medicine residency program. Doctors on the program's faculty have been treating patients in Winter Haven since summer.

No need to wait until the first medical residents arrive to see a doctor at Florida State University College of Medicine's newest family medicine residency program.

Doctors on the program's faculty have been treating patients in Winter Haven since summer, with 750 patient visits the last quarter of 2019.

"We're well above our projection," said Dr. Nathan Falk, who directs the program based at Winter Haven Hospital.

Arrival of the first six residents — medical doctors getting post-graduate training — will start increasing the program's impact.

Additional classes of six doctors will arrive each year, which means — from the third year on — 18 medical residents at a time will be learning and taking care of patients.

The plan is for residency program doctors — faculty and students — to see 14,000 patients a year at that point, said Joy Johnson, relations administrator for Polk County's indigent-care plan and other programs in the county's Health and Human Services Division.

What happens when they complete the three-year residency?

It's hoped as many as half stay in Polk to practice.

Polk has a severe shortage of primary care physicians, the category that includes family medicine.

The county has one primary care doctor for each 2,030 residents, compared to 1 for 1,390 statewide, says a 2019 report from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

Fifty-four percent of doctors start practice within 100 miles of where they do residencies, an analysis of American Medical Association physician data found a few years ago. Almost 40 percent start practice within 25 miles and almost 20 percent within 5 miles.

How new clinic works

As faculty does now, medical residents will see patients regularly at BayCare Medical Group's Family Health Center. BayCare Health System is Winter Haven Hospital's parent company.

They will work with doctors at WHH, its women's hospital, Central Florida Health Care, Bond Clinic, Gessler Clinic, Messieh Orthopedic Clinic and KSC Cardiology. They'll be at Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital for a pediatric rotation.

Each will have some patients whom they follow throughout the full three years of residency, accustoming them to the continuity of practicing in a community, Falk said.

He is touching base with free volunteer clinics that receive some funding from the county's half-cent indigent-care sales tax, in the hope medical residents will get involved there.

"We really want folks that are community minded," he said. "We want (them) to come in and get engrossed in our community and develop community partnerships."

The twin goals of that approach are:

Encourage doctors to see Polk as a place to remain.

Boost the network of care for Polk's uninsured and underinsured

Those goals persuaded Polk government officials, in the face of some opposition, to commit almost \$4 million in indigent-care tax dollars toward getting the residency program operating.

"We're investing in the future of our community, the future of the health-care landscape," Johnson said of the August 2017 vote.

Clinic doctors treat patients on Medicaid, Medicare, Medicare Advantage and commercial insurance.

Some uninsured patients also are treated. Its doctors see newborn and neonatal patients who aren't linked with a physician, as well as some doctorless patients referred from WHH.

"If they don't have a doctor, we can see them if they're insured or uninsured," Falk said.

Faculty members are enthusiastic about their program.

"I'm very positive about education and being able to provide to a community that's underserved," said Dr. Ashley Wilk.

"It's given people a lot more accessibility," said Dr. Niyomi De Silva.

Referrals for more specialized care go to BayCare doctors and community clinics/physicians, Falk said.

The clinic's number is 863-280-6080.

For information about other county-linked programs for uninsured and underinsured people, call 863-533-1111. Outpost offices countywide can help people register.

The Already Existing Network

The residency program is an important addition to a network of programs Polk County works with and helps fund, Johnson said.

The county has worked with Central Florida Health Care to expand its clinics, which have specialists in areas other than primary care.

Numerous private doctors take patients approved for the Polk Health Care Plan, which covers uninsured county residents whose income is 100 percent of poverty guidelines or below.

The total of people helped through those and other programs reached 31,362 in 2019, a 46 percent increase from 2018, Johnson said.

“The number of services provided have increased by 25 percent,” she added. Several services, such as X-ray or pharmacy, may be included in a single visit.

Dental care and mental/behavioral health care are other areas in which indigent-care tax funds are deployed.

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