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TMH residency program funded

The proposed new internal medicine residency program at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare cleared a major hurdle Wednesday.

The federal body that funds residency programs nationwide, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), announced that the program will receive funding for 39 slots.

Plans to launch the internal medicine residency program, a joint effort between Florida State University's College of Medicine and TMH, were announced last August. It would be the second residency program in the area, with a family medicine residency already established at TMH.

The lone remaining hurdle before FSU and TMH can begin recruiting medical school graduates next year is approval by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. It conducted a site visit last month and is expected to issue a ruling in September.

Medical residency programs play a vital role in a region's health-care landscape. Numerous studies have shown that most doctors begin their careers close to where they complete their residency. Ten of the 11 graduates of TMH's 2011 family medicine graduates remained in North Florida, with five starting their careers in Tallahassee.

Kim Williams, chairman of the Economic Development Council and chair-elect of TMH's Board of Directors, said the new internal medicine program may be the key to attracting both retirees and new businesses to the greater Tallahassee area.

"This is a great step in the right direction," Williams said. "Each resident is a new small business with a \$1-million base with additional employees."

"Retirees can't come to Tallahassee without a physician to treat them, and we've got a huge shortage in Tallahassee — especially in internal medicine."

The FSU/TMH program, the first residency partnership between the two institutions, tied for the second highest number of added slots for any one hospital in the nation.

"CMS's decision to place thirty-nine residency slots at Tallahassee Memorial speaks to the need for additional physicians in the Big Bend and the success of our current Family Medicine Residency Program to keep its graduates in our region," said Mark O'Bryant, TMH's president & CEO.

Dr. John Fogarty, dean of FSU's medical school, said the Big Bend can expect to see more physicians establishing careers in the area.

"If we expect to keep our best doctors in Florida we've got to develop new residency programs for them," Fogarty said. "I'm pleased that the addition of these new slots recognizes the need for more primary care physicians in Florida. It's a big boost in our effort to produce more of the kinds of doctors Florida needs most."

Dr. Alma Littles, assistant dean at FSU's College of Medicine, has spearheaded the university's efforts to establish the new residency program. While they had applied to have 39 positions funded, it wasn't clear until Wednesday whether it would happen.

"We're pleasantly surprised that we got the full number that we applied for," Littles said. "Now that we've got the money we've got to get the accrediting body's approval so we can start recruiting residents."