

Volunteering in Immokalee, Florida: Finding My Purpose in Medicine

PA Student Spends Spring Break Giving Back

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The FSUCares team.

For as long as I can remember, I have always viewed equal access to healthcare as a fundamental human right. The more I became exposed to health disparities, the more I became interested in pursuing a career in medicine, but the exact path remained uncertain. It was not until my sophomore year of my undergraduate career that I was exposed to the PA profession.

Passion for healthcare

After some research, I was immediately captivated by the limitless opportunities that the profession had to

offer, such as the lateral mobility to switch specialties, or the opportunity to help shape the future of a relatively new profession. What caught my attention most about becoming a PA was the opportunity to expand access to healthcare to underserved communities. The more I learned about becoming a PA, the more my interest grew.

My passion for rural medicine led me to where I am today: a first-year PA student at the Florida State University College of Medicine, a college that truly embodies its mission of training and preparing patient-centered providers who will be responsive to the communities' needs through service to elder, rural, minority, and underserved populations.

[PA Program Prioritizes Mental Health]

Inevitably, there is an immeasurable amount of stress associated with being in the didactic phase of PA school. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the rigorous course load. As I tackled the challenges that come

with being a PA student, it was only too easy to lose sight of my purpose in medicine and why I had chosen to become a PA.

Reconnecting with motivation

Wanting to reconnect with my motivations for becoming a PA, I decided to spend spring break volunteering with FSU **Cares** in Immokalee, Florida. FSU **Cares** is a medical student organization devoted to serving underprivileged populations through health services such as medical care, education, and counseling. Serving communities locally and globally, FSU **Cares** focuses on unique public health factors influencing different cultures in order to prepare culturally competent providers.

Immokalee, which means “my home” in the Seminole language, is located in the southwest region of Florida in Collier County. With a population of approximately 24,000, Spanish and Haitian-Creole immigrants make up a majority of the population, most of whom work in the fields and in local packing houses. As a part of FSU **Cares**, our team consisted of two College of Medicine faculty members, 10 first-year medical students, and me.

We worked alongside community leaders to provide health screenings and health education for migrant farmworkers and their families who otherwise may not have received the medical attention they required. Height, weight, blood pressure, and blood glucose were a few of the services we offered at the screenings. We were able to not only provide these services for patients, but also make them aware of the resources available to them in their community. The Florida State University College of Medicine Health Education Site in Immokalee provides medical services in family medicine, pediatrics, and women’s health. At the Center for Child Stress and Health, also located there, screening services are available for children who have been impacted by toxic stress that could be related to factors such as poverty and immigration.

[PA School Success: Embrace Opportunities and Challenges, Relieve Stress]

An eye-opening and unforgettable experience

To say that this experience was eye-opening and unforgettable is simply not saying enough. Every day was a learning experience, from a medical standpoint as well as from a cultural stance. Our team of multidisciplinary leaders worked extremely well together as we combated obstacles such as language barriers while ensuring that health screenings went as smoothly as possible for patients.

My experience in Immokalee impacted my education in more ways than I could have imagined. It not only further solidified my passion for service through medicine, but also allowed me the opportunity to witness firsthand the shortage of medical professionals in rural America. More specifically, I saw the gap created by the shortage of bilingual healthcare professionals in our nation.

As a future PA, I hope to help bridge the gaps separating rural and underserved communities from the rest of the nation, as well as the gap between immigrant families and healthcare providers. I encourage any student or provider who may have lost sight of what initially instilled the passion within them to reflect and find their purpose again and to once again be reminded why we devote ourselves to the profession and to our future patients.

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