

FSU College of Medicine students get glimpse of practicing in rural communities

Byron Dobson, Tallahassee Democrat | Published 3:47 p.m. ET June 7, 2018 | Updated 5:47 p.m. ET June 7, 2018



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

They grew up mostly in cities like Jacksonville, Tampa, West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Miami, Tallahassee and even San Diego.

Small town Quincy, with its population of just over 7,500 residents, is alien to what they're accustomed to.

No wonder few of the first-year Florida State University College of Medicine medical and physician assistant students raised their hands when nurse Mary Jane Bailey asked how many were from areas with only one high school, fewer than five restaurants and no more than 10 traffic lights.

FSU med school's mandate is training doctors and physicians assistants to work in out-of-the-way places. A recent tour to rural medical centers in places like Cairo, Georgia, Marianna, Panacea and Medart and Quincy gave students a glimpse of what could lay in store.

Exposing students to different kinds of patients

It was part of the college's Rural Learning Experience or RuLE, sponsored by the Florida Blue Foundation. The idea is to give students an early look at where they could perform their life's work. The Jessie Furlow Medical Center in Quincy was one of the stops.

"It's really to expose our students to the patients in rural areas so they can see the challenges faced by patients in accessing health care, and hearing from individuals in the community providing that care," said Dr. Alma Littles, senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs.

"One of my goals was to encourage and inspire more students to practice in rural settings," said Littles, who still lives in Quincy, her hometown.

Big city practice for small towns



FSU Medical students listen to a discussion on rural healthcare at North Florida Medical Center in Gadsden County on Friday, June 1, 2018. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

A major mission of the college is to train physicians who forgo lucrative, big city practice for small towns and hard to reach communities, where patients are often poor and uninsured.

Since 2005, the college has produced nearly 600 practicing physicians. Of those, 54 percent are in primary care specialties, including internal medicine, family medicine, pediatrics and OB-GYN.

About 56 percent of those physicians practice in Florida or in nearby Alabama and Georgia – the college has a rural training center in Thomasville.

According to the 2017 annual report, FSU graduates are practicing in underserved communities of Blountstown, Perry, Crestview, Port Richey, Apalachicola, Bonifay, Port St. Joe, Apopka and Clermont.

Several are working in health centers in larger cities that also treat patients living in nearby communities.



Pat Walker of outreach and enrollment with North Florida Medical Center gives FSU medical students a tour of the facility on Friday, June 1, 2018. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Bailey works as a family nurse practitioner at North Florida Medical Center in Tallahassee. She grew up in the Gulf County town of Wewahitchka, where she said "there was one doctor and he had a nurse."

"I want to encourage you, as you are moving through your training, that you give rural health a look," said Bailey, a nurse of 21 years. "It can be very rewarding."

Bailey said North Florida Medical's 10 centers serve about 19,000 patients annually. Of those, 34 percent are uninsured; of the 60 percent insured, a mere 16 percent have private coverage. Most of the patients suffer from hypertension, diabetes and ailments associated with obesity.

Rural health centers need physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants, she said, "because so many physicians are retiring and the population that needs to be served is growing."

"We also need dentists and mental health workers," she added.

'Talk to your patients like a friend'



FSU medical student Stenia Accilien listens in during a gathering at the New Bethel AME church in Quincy for a discussion on rural healthcare on Friday, June 1, 2018. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

The Jessie Furlow Center has one full-time doctor and two nurse practitioners serving about 3,200 patients. The center sees 45 to 50 patients daily, Bailey said.

During a stop at Quincy's New Bethel A.M.E. Church, the group heard from the Rev. Charles Morris, about the rewards of serving in smaller communities and making an impact.

Nell Cunningham, 91, and her husband, Sam, 93, both of Havana, gave students some folksy advice on what rural residents need in their physicians.

"Take all the courses you can take in bedside manners," said Nell, a retired teacher.

"Talk to your patients like a friend," urged Sam, a retired forensic psychologist.

Stenia Accilien was among the students listening intently. She graduated with a master's degree in biomedical sciences from the college in May and is now a medical student.

Her interest in rural health care was shaped by her childhood in Haiti. She wants to become a surgeon.

"I'm interested because that's the environment I grew up in," she said. "I'm willing to give back. It's important because we think everybody in the United States has access to healthcare, but the truth is, that's not always the case."

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