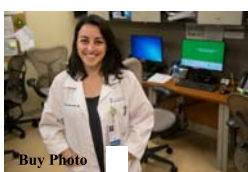


Lee Health is training a new generation of in-demand doctors. But can it keep them?

Frank Gluck, Fort Myers News-Press Published 7:00 a.m. ET Oct. 1, 2018



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(Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press)

Tatianna Pizzutto, a 26-year-old recent graduate of the Florida State University College of Medicine, has long wanted to be a family practice physician.

And though she's from Clearwater, she said she plans to do so for a long time in Southwest Florida.

All of which makes Pizzutto, a first-year member of the Lee Health Medical Residency Program, a perfect fit for a program whose founding principle is to recruit and retain new doctors here.

"I've always loved being close to the water and in a sunny place," Pizzutto said. "I love the community that we have here. I can't imagine why somebody would want to leave Southwest Florida, honestly, for a Boston or a Chicago. For family medicine, community health, this area is pretty key."

The residency program, a required training step for medical school graduates, places them in real-world clinics and hospitals to learn the non-textbook side of doctoring. The program, a partnership with the Florida State University College of Medicine, is now entering its fifth year under the direction of Dr. Alfred Gitu, who took over as its director in July.

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Tatianna Pizzutto, 26, is a doctor in the Lee Health Medical Residency Program. She hopes to open a clinic in Southwest Florida and do medical missionary work once she completes her training. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press)

Lee Health created the program, with the assistance of state and federal funding, in response to a growing shortage of primary care physicians. One often-cited 2013 [American Medical Association study](https://www.aafp.org/aafp/2013/1115/p704.html) (https://www.aafp.org/aafp/2013/1115/p704.html) found that about 56 percent of doctors stay within 100 miles of their residency programs.

The program's success in recruitment and retention has been mixed, though it is in line with initial projections.

Of the Lee Health program's 18 graduates to date, five currently have jobs with Lee Health, according to employment records and interviews with the doctors.

Another four work in the broader Southwest Florida region, some direct competitors to Lee Health, spanning Sarasota to Fort Myers. The rest have taken postings elsewhere in Florida or outside of the state.

Only one of this year's six program graduates took a job with Lee Health. Another just started work with the competing Physicians' Primary Care in Fort Myers.

Gitu said the program's ability to encourage about half of its graduates to practice in the region is largely on par with other residency programs and pretty much what Lee Health expected. (The program's now-retired founding director, Dr. Gary Goforth, [said as much in a 2015 \(/story/news/nation/2015/03/15/fla-residency-program-remedy-doctor-shortage/24813701/\) interview.](#))

"Now, I would love for that to be 100 percent. That's my goal, and that's my hope," Gitu said. "But, of course, these are adults and we cannot make them stay any more than in any other field."

The need for new doctors — particularly certain specialties, such as primary care — is only expected to grow in Florida as the population continues to boom.

Compounding that problem: More than 34 percent of Florida doctors are at least 60 years old — the seventh highest rate among the states, according to a 2017 [Association of American Medical Colleges report \(/https://members.aamc.org/eweb/upload/2017%20State%20Physician%20Workforce%20Data%20Report.pdf\).](#)

Florida's medical residency programs have made headway in addressing this, though not enough to deal with the problem, according to a [December report \(http://safetynetsflorida.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-the-State-report-on-GME-2017.pdf\)](#) by the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida and the Teaching Hospital Council of Florida.

It also noted that Southwest Florida continues to have a "severe" shortage of primary care physicians.

Lindy Kennedy, president of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, said the region has suffered because it does not have a large educational institution with medical programs and its hospitals did not historically have residency programs.

"We really have to build our own and train our own. Trying to recruit physicians from other parts of the state or from other states is just not as effective," Kennedy said. "If what happens in the Southwest Florida region is replicated in what we've seen in other areas of the state, we should have very good results."

So, residency programs will bring the physicians. But their decisions about whether to stay or not often comes down to their personal needs, recruiters say.

For some, Southwest Florida's sun and beaches are a perfect fit. For others, that's not enough.

"There's no magic pill that can make people remain because things change," Gitu said. "They get married, their partners get a job somewhere else, and things like that."

Dr. Roy Klossner, the program's first entrant, now practices in a northwest Minnesota clinic. His son, Jacob, who has autism and severe epilepsy, had been on a waiting list for needed services in Florida.

The family was told the wait might be as long as eight years.

"The Midwest is very good at the required support systems and social systems for disabled people, and hence we moved here," Klossner said. "He is getting his own disabled housing next month and is getting training in how to live independently. His dreams are literally coming true here."

Dr. Carl Nyberg, a Fort Myers High School graduate who completed his residency last year, initially took a job with NCH Healthcare System but now works in Oklahoma City.

His wife, who is also a physician, was accepted to a medical fellowship program at the University of Oklahoma. There were no comparable programs in this region, he said.

"Sadly, I had to leave Southwest Florida, the place I trained and, Fort Myers, the city which I grew up most of my life," he said in an email, adding that they may return to the area after his wife completes her training. "I still would love to work for and contribute to the education of future residents while caring for patients seen at the program, once all my wife's training endeavors are completed."

About the program

Florida doctors specializing in family medicine are required to complete three years of medical residency after graduating from medical school.

Lee Health's "cradle to grave" spectrum of training places doctors in maternity wards, outpatient clinics, emergency departments and caring for elderly patients.

Lee Health's program costs about \$5 million a year to operate and is supported by state and federal tax dollars.

It started with six doctors in 2014, its inaugural year. Today, each class has eight family practice physicians. Administrators say there are no immediate plans to increase class sizes, though they may do so in the coming years.

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