



## **Editorial: Winter Haven Hospital's innovation chips away at our doctor shortage**

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The congressional Republicans' much-ballyhooed promise to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act proved to be a colossal flop — succumbing in large part to troubling reports about the millions of Americans who may lose healthcare coverage if Obamacare went the way of the dinosaurs.

Lost in that issue, however, was a vital question: What difference does it make if you have health insurance but can't find a doctor if you get sick?

Last week Polk County's Citizens Healthcare Oversight Committee endorsed a solution toward that end.

The panel, which is responsible for managing the proceeds of the county's half-cent sales tax for health care, recommended a three-year, \$3.75 million initiative to launch a residency program at Winter Haven Hospital for primary-care physicians.

According to the plan, as The Ledger reported, the hospital would use the funding to renovate a 12,000-square-foot building next to its behavioral health unit to serve as the real-world classroom, and eventual clinic. A half-dozen soon-to-be doctors, arriving in July 2019, would serve as the inaugural class, with six more medical students added to the program for each of the next two years, for a total of 18 slots.

Hospital President Steve Nierman said the hospital hopes to cut a deal with Florida State University's medical school to supply the students. Nierman explained to the oversight committee last week that the facility is necessary to getting accreditation for the program. He pledged that after three years the hospital would assume the operational costs and not return to the committee seeking additional funding.

The proposal must be ratified by the County Commission. The commission should do so. It's a good idea that, after a relatively small, one-time infusion of tax dollars, promises to start filling a couple of gaps in Polk County's healthcare system.

The first, as Assistant County Manager Lea Ann Thomas told the committee, is that fewer doctors are accepting new Medicaid patients because the reimbursement rates have not kept pace. This leaves many poor families without access to care, even if they obtain Medicaid coverage. This program could help them.

But Polk County, like many largely rural communities, is facing a more general struggle in attracting and keeping primary-care doctors — who essentially form the first line of defense in our system because they can cure illnesses before they develop into issues that require more specialized, and expensive, care.

The Ledger noted that Polk County has roughly 50 primary-care doctors for each 100,000 residents. That is 27 fewer than the state average, and 37 below the national average. Looked at differently, according to the esteemed Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Polk County features one primary care doctor for each 1,970 people. In Florida, that ratio is 1 for every 1,380 residents, while in the nation's top-performing communities it falls to 1,040-1.

The issue is not going to get better. On Monday, *Governing* magazine, citing a study by the influential Kaiser Family Foundation, reported that by 2025 America will face a shortage of 95,000 doctors, with as many as 36,000 of them being primary-care physicians. Rural areas would be hardest hit. The shortfall for Florida is expected to run 17 percent.

The good news, though, is that two of every three doctors indicate that they stay in the place where they complete their residency program.

Clearly, we need more doctors, and Winter Haven Hospital won't fill the gap all by itself, obviously. But, with the County Commission's blessing, the hospital can in just two years create an opportunity for people in east Polk to gain more access to quality health care. Commissioners should support this idea.