

RMCHCS approved to build medicine residency program

Written by Gallupsun Staff
Friday, 08 February 2019 08:57



Valory Wangler, MD
Chief Medical Officer

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Training program will focus on Native Americans and rural residents

By William Madaras
For the Sun

Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services announced Jan. 28 that it received approval to build a family medicine residency program from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. The ACGME monitors and sets U.S. professional educational standards in preparing physicians to deliver medical care.

The approval will allow future doctors to receive their residency training in a real-world medical facility at RMCHCS's College Clinic. Upon graduation in 2024, physicians will be encouraged to open family practices in the Gallup area.

"This is the first step in the vision I had set for RMCHCS to offer residency to physicians to open family practices," said RMCHCS CEO David Conejo. "By taking this first initial step, we are paving the way to expand rural health to the Four Corners area and improve the lives of residents by providing greater healthcare."

RMNCHS's College Clinic will provide specialized training in rural and Native American healthcare to serve the Navajo Nation, Pueblo of Zuni and others. Resident physicians will learn about conditions that disproportionately affect Native Americans such as diabetes and asthma.

They will also learn skills as well such as how to treat patients who may not always have access to things like running water and refrigeration, which can be necessary for medical care. Rotations at Indian Health Service and other partner sites will provide further exposure to Native American life, culture and the challenges those residents face in seeking care.

The residency program will enable those who have graduated from medical school to receive healthcare training in areas underserved by physicians. This type of program acclimates them

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to the community in hopes they will open medical practices that will serve residents. Physicians are often offered enticements to remain in rural areas through government tax incentives, education loan repayments and grants.

“Healthcare in rural areas like Gallup is important to the area’s development and growth. Businesses, education facilities and consumer enterprises all rely on community development and one of the pillars of growth in good medical care,” said RMCHCS’s Chief Medical Officer Dr. Valory Wangler, whose goal has been to establish the accreditation since she joined the hospital in 2018.

The hospital anticipates about four resident physicians per class and plans to expand its family care training to other types of medical specialization in the future.

STATEWIDE SHORTAGE

New Mexico currently has a shortage of physicians in 32 of its 33 counties. While RMCHCS will focus on the Four Corners area of New Mexico, other hospitals focus on other parts of the state.

“Healthcare is a vital need for all residents statewide,” Stephen Stoddard, CEO of the New Mexico Rural Hospital Network said. “The goal of New Mexico’s healthcare community is to bridge the gap in rural health and ensure adequate and appropriate care is available to all New Mexican’s regardless of their address.”

One of the organizations that promotes state physician residency is the New Mexico Primary Care Training Consortium. The organization helps create residency programs through affiliations with the Christus St. Vincent Family Residency Program in Santa Fe, the Southern New Mexico Family Medicine Residency Program in Las Cruces, the University of New Mexico Family Residency in Albuquerque and the Hidalgo Medical Services in Silver City.

“Primary care is the backbone of our healthcare system, NMPCTC President Dr. John Andazola said. “With the shift to more patient-centered care, primary care physicians will lead the way towards delivering more preventative care for long-term health, while managing patients’ acute

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and chronic care. Especially in rural states, like New Mexico.”

The Health Extension Rural Offices link community priority health needs with University of New Mexico Health Science Center resources to achieve measurable improvement in health status for residents.

In addition to the NMPCTC, the RTT Collaborative helps sustain health professions education in rural places through mutual encouragement, peer learning, practice improvement, and the delivery of technical expertise, all in support of a quality rural workforce.

The organization helped guide RMCHCS through its residency program design and has also helped the Gerald Champion Regional Medical Center Family Medicine Residency Program in Alamogordo and the Hidalgo Medical Services Family Services Medical Program in Silver City.

“Our organization has been assisting the development of residencies since 2012,” RTT Executive Directory Randall Longenecker said. “Medical school and residency require 7 years of training so we cannot yet determine how many graduates will set up practices in rural areas, but so far we have seen a 30 percent increase in students joining rural residency programs, so we are optimistic.”

The RTT is a cooperative of 29 rural residency programs operating across the U.S.