

# Battling the Perfect Storm in Family Health Care

A “perfect storm” occurs when simultaneous meteorological forces combine to intensify weather conditions, such as rain, winds and storm surge. In a similar fashion, a perfect storm is now forming that threatens the availability of family/primary health care. Several demographic trends, including growth in the general population, seniors and insured, and an increase in the number of physicians who pursue specialized practice, are contributing to a growing shortage of primary care physicians. In fact, experts anticipate that an additional 52,000 family care physicians will be needed by 2025 to meet the increased demand, which is expected to be even more acute in rural areas.

In fact, Valley Health has been working to address this shortage for 20 years. Since 1997 when Valley Health first partnered with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to establish the VCU-Shenandoah Valley Family Practice Residency Program (SVFPRP), based at Warren Memorial Hospital, 72 family physicians have graduated, and 25% have remained in the area to serve the medical needs of our community. Many come to our program with an interest in rural medical practice, so it is significant that over half of the graduates now practice in small towns and two-thirds serve patients in Virginia.

Frank Dennehy, MD, VHS residency director, joins the 2016 SVFPRP graduates at the June celebration. From left, Dennehy, Benjamin Kaplan-Singer, MD, Jessica Jackson, DO, David Leng, MD, Candace Wise, DO, and Kyle Song, DO.

The most recent SVFPRP class celebrated the conclusion of eleven years of academic and clinical work at their graduation in June. These physicians spent the last three years working at Valley Health hospitals, focusing on family medicine, and honing their skills in a range of subspecialties, including surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, adult medicine, pediatrics, and emergency medicine. All five plan to practice in Virginia, and Jessica Jackson, DO, will work at WMC as a hospitalist.

“If Americans are to have access to the care they need, we must have a system that recruits medical students into primary care, supports the schools that produce primary care graduates, expands community-based residency programs in communities that need services, and establishes a patient-centered practice environment...”

*Reid Blackwelder, MD, past president of the American Academy of Family Physicians*

Dr. Jackson had high praise for her experiences in the VCU-VHS program. She notes that working with physicians at both WMC and Warren offered the “best of both worlds.” WMC provided the opportunity to work with specialists on more complex cases in a larger hospital setting, while her time at WMH was enriched by a professional, yet smaller, family atmosphere.

“Warren is a very special hospital,” she said during a recent interview. “Everyone on staff is close knit and gets along well; there’s great teamwork and respect, so it’s a setting where everyone thrives.”

She also praised the collegial environment fostered by Frank Dennehy, MD, VHS residency director. Jackson explains that the close relationship between the three classes of residents and practicing physician faculty at Front Royal Family Practice creates strong bonds and offers chances to mentor and be mentored. She also notes that being a resident is an intense lifestyle with long work weeks, however the Valley Health program invests in the well-being of the residents by financially supporting social activities to help fight burn out.

In addition to providing the last formal educational period for family physicians, the residency program helps prepare the residents for rigorous examinations, including the American Board of Family Medicine examination. All five in the 2016 class passed their board examinations, the culmination of years of study.

“It was rewarding working with this bright, dedicated group of new physicians, and we are happy for each of them as they embark on their new professional adventures,” notes Dr. Dennehy. “At the same time, we are proud knowing that this exceptional group will take the expertise they learned at Valley Health and use it as they care for their patients in the years ahead. What a wonderful legacy as we celebrate the 20th year of this worthwhile program!”

