

Public universities across Arizona work to increase access to health care

By KOLD 13 News Staff, Andres Rendon | June 1, 2023

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TUCSON, Ariz. (13 News) - The Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) held a special meeting, where Arizona State University presented many goals and initiatives such as the creation of a new medical school. However, concerns over the state's physician shortage were also shared.



Fred DuVal, ABOR Chair

To combat the shortage and to increase access to health care, especially in rural areas, ASU, along with Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona are collaborating for the AZ Healthy Tomorrow initiative.

The initiative aims to combine the schools' resources and staff to help address needs in health care, with staffing shortages being a primary concern.

"This has become a frightening sight of illness and expense that many people personally know," said Robert Herbold, a member of the Arizona Board of Regents.



According to Dr. Dan Derksen with the University of Arizona's Center for Rural Health, the state currently has approximately 28.5 resident physicians [in training – also known as graduate medical education]* per every 100,000 people. He says the state should be closer to the national average, which is around 43. Derksen says right now there are not enough medical residency slots available [to keep our medical and osteopathic students in the state after completing their MD or DO school]*.

"So when our students graduate from medical or osteopathic school in Arizona, they often have to leave the state to get residency training so they can become board certified and practice," Derksen says.

"And when they leave the state, 75 percent of them don't come back."

According to Derksen, one way to help to increase the number of physicians is to start fostering interest in medicine from a young age. He says more investments should be made to provide resources to high school students who show an interest in a medical career.

Derksen himself started his career path when he was a high school student participating in medical education programs.

"I took a year off right after high school, and worked in an orphanage where my sister was a nurse in Mexico. That was a life changing experience for me - to be in a place and see how you can provide health care and really make a difference in people's lives."

Derksen also says more investment in primary care training is needed to not only build a workforce but to also keep patients healthier.

According to ABOR, fundraising and designing processes are already underway for a proposed medical school, a new health observatory, and expanding health literacy for people across the state.

**Dr. Derksen: Arizona is the 14th most populous state yet ranks 37th of the states in medical residency slots (graduate medical education or GME). This contributes to the practicing physician shortage in Arizona – it ranks 42nd in primary care physicians and 31st in practicing physicians per 100,000 population of the states. Arizona would need 1,100 full time equivalent resident positions to be where we should be based on our population. See: <https://crh.arizona.edu/publications/policy-reports-briefs>*