

# Apodaca championing MAHEC's vision for WNC health

JEFFERY E. HECK, MD GUEST COLUMNIST , *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, July 2, 2015



ASHEVILLE –

The Mountain Area Health Education Center is a model of success of the North Carolina AHEC system. For more than 40 years, MAHEC has trained physicians, pharmacists and dentists for Western North Carolina.

Currently there are more than 300 physicians practicing in WNC and every county has been a beneficiary of MAHEC's training programs. MAHEC hosts residency programs in family medicine in Asheville and Hendersonville and an OB/GYN residency in Asheville. There is also a branch campus of the UNC School of Medicine based at MAHEC that has quickly gained national attention for its innovative curriculum.

The Center for Advanced Dental Training along with fellowships in geriatrics, hospice and palliative care, and sports Medicine produce specialized dentists and physicians for the region. MAHEC also provides continuing education programs for all health professions and our community at large for more than 10,000 participants every year.

The current proposed state Senate budget includes an annual appropriation of funds to MAHEC to expand our mission to train healthcare providers for the western part of the state. This legislation is being championed by Sen. Tom Apodaca, R-Henderson, based on extensive conversations with MAHEC. The senator has been a strong supporter of MAHEC in the past.

This initiative has the potential to make a substantial health and economic impact in the region by expanding the UNC Health Sciences Campus in WNC.

The plan calls for adding new residency training programs including general surgery, family medicine and psychiatry.

Since 65 percent of doctors who train in residencies practice within 100 miles of the residency location at the completion of their training, WNC communities will see a benefit for years to come.

In addition, this funding will provide new opportunities to conduct population health research that will benefit the entire state and new support for the medical school will accelerate the inter-professional training and practice in primary care that includes integrated behavioral health, clinical pharmacy and public health. Most importantly this opportunity will enable MAHEC to expand training sites to even more rural counties and hospitals in the west with hopes that more health professionals will choose to practice in our most needy communities. MAHEC's long standing relationship with the University of North Carolina, particularly the School of Medicine and the School of Pharmacy, will further carry the excellence of those institutions into those communities.

The need for more healthcare providers in WNC is great. Each of the 16 counties in WNC is a population or geographic primary care Health Professional Shortage Area. In WNC, there is an estimated shortage of 140 primary care providers and at least 20 general surgeons.

The number of individuals in the region with behavioral health problems continues to grow; an estimated 16 percent of adults have a behavioral health diagnosis, and the region has a suicide rate significantly higher than national benchmarks.

Access to effective healthcare, a healthy workforce, and lower overall healthcare costs are key factors to reinvigorate a positive small business and growth environment in the region.

Decentralizing health education to areas of need not only increases the number of primary care physicians, OB/GYN doctors, surgeons and pharmacists in rural areas, it also creates professional jobs and secures the health of communities.

Without access to good healthcare, businesses are reluctant to locate in those communities.

The creation of a robust academic health center in WNC will change the future of our part of the state. Communities such as Chapel Hill and Durham that have a strong presence of higher education and an academic health center create deep and broad economic prosperity.

WNC now has that possibility. MAHEC thanks Sen. Apodaca for his vision and determination and we urge the House and the governor to support this appropriation.

Jeffery E. Heck, MD is president and CEO, MAHEC, associate dean, UNC School of Medicine, Asheville campus.