

MAHEC outreach should boost vital mission

Filed under Opinions and Editorials

Reprinted from the Asheville Citizen-Times, April 26, 2013

MAHEC may not be very well-known, but it is one of the most vital elements in Western North Carolina's medical system.

It has done a lot of good work, but a lot more is needed. That's why it is reaching out to the community.

The Mountain Area Health Education Center, established in 1974, has provided residency training for 377 family-practice physicians, obstetricians-gynecologists and dentists. It has the region's only specialized care for high-risk pregnancies.

It has one of the nation's top residency programs for family-practice physicians. Of those trained here, 62 percent have remained in the region.

"Our goal is to train doctors for practice in small-town America," said Tina Owen, MAHEC director of development. "We really believe we are here to train them to keep them in Western North Carolina."

Despite these efforts, the problem persists. WNC "currently has an estimated shortage of 140 primary-care physicians, and the need will increase as access to primary care expands with health-care reform, and as our population ages," said Dr. Steve Hulkower, director of MAHEC's Division of Family Medicine.

Think how bad the situation would have been without MAHEC. In any case, the agency's impact in the community goes beyond training. It provided health services to more than 100,000 people last year. Nearly half the births at Mission Hospital in the 2011-12 budget year involved MAHEC trainees or physicians.

And that is only the beginning. MAHEC has fellowships in geriatrics and in hospice and palliative care. It runs the Asheville campus for third- and fourth-year medical students from UNC Chapel Hill.

It provided continuing education for more than 23,000 health-care workers last year. And it is working with primary-care practices to implement electronic health records systems to improve quality and efficiency.

On Thursday, it kicked off its "First Day of Giving" campaign to encourage charitable gifts so it can expand its operations.

"I think the pressures of the changing health care situation, the anticipated declining reimbursement for medical service, particularly for poor people, I think we have to look outside the traditional ways to fund those services," said Dr. Jeffery Heck, MAHEC president and CEO.

MAHEC provided \$4.8 million in care for low-income and uninsured patients last year, Owen said. One reason the agency is seeking gifts is so it can do more in this area.

"One of the areas where I think we have been most active is in women's health. We provide a lot of services for low-income, pregnant women," Heck said. "We'd like to have our services available to more women in the rural areas and to expand our services to include even more access."

Other targets for expansion include geriatric care and internships for WNC college students interested in the health care profession.

MAHEC doesn't just train health professionals, it trains good ones. "They're actually turning out a really good product. They fill with top-notch graduates from across the country," said Dr. Brian Moore.

Dr. Ladson Gaddy-Dubac, an OB-GYN in Franklin, is a great believer in the MAHEC residency. "I think they are instrumental at really preparing their graduates to take on those roles in rural communities because it is different," the Enka High School and UNC-Chapel Hill grad said.

The charitable-giving drive will not have a lot of bells and whistles. "Our fundraising will take a very low-key approach. We are interested if there are organizations or patients that really support the work that MAHEC has done over the years; we would love to partner with them," Heck said.

We hope enough of them come forward so MAHEC can do even more good work.