Buoyed by a historic donation, Providence St. Mary expects a new residency program for physicians in 2025.

Providing St. Mary Medical Center has officially applied for accreditation for an internal medicine residency program, a move that promises new educational opportunities to help alleviate a nationwide doctor shortage and improve access to care.

If all goes as planned, the program's inaugural cohort of physicians will start their Apple Valley residency in July 2025, under the direction of new chief medical officer K. Kevin Park, MD.

The announcement of the program comes amid a stark nationwide doctor shortage, which has led to less access to care locally. The U.S. Council on Graduate Medical Education recommends 60 to 80 primary care doctors per 100,000 people. In the High Desert, that number is 35 doctors per 100,000, an alarming 40%-lower than the recommendation.

"Increasing the number of primary care physicians will ensure patients have better access to care, close to home, in their time of need," Dr. Park says.

John Kozyra, executive director of operations at St. Mary, says discussions for the venture began in 2021. By the end of that year, the hospital had partnered with a consulting firm that specializes in developing residency programs. "We understood that training internal medicine doctors would be the most impactful approach to meet the needs of our community," he explains.

Not only is the program expected to expand the number of physicians in the High Desert, but it will also help strengthen the quality of care via doctors who bring with them the latest advancements in health care. Dr. Park notes that new medical school graduates typically have a deep knowledge of evidence-based care and are on the leading edge of medical techniques and advancements in the field. "Having the residents here, you create an environment of academic culture and the needs of the community. They'll know how to relate to their patients, how to relate to their community, one of the things we talk about is the 'golden hour.' That's the first hour after the injury occurs. What gets done in that time has a high likelihood of predicting whether a patient survives," Dr. Park explains. "In the trauma community, one of the things we talk about is the golden hour. 'That's the first hour after the injury occurs. What gets done in that time has a high likelihood of predicting whether a patient survives,' Wirtz expects to see an increase in volume of about 400 patients in the first year of designation. Most will likely be accident victims. "We suspect our No. 1 mechanism of injury will be a vehicle, simply because we're so close to Interstate 15. But we're prepared to treat anyone, from a person who falls off a ladder putting up Christmas lights to a gunshot victim," he says.

Among other concerns, the San Bernardino County Civil Grand Jury's report found that a shortage of ED beds and the lack of a trauma center in the High Desert contribute to bed delays locally. "Beyond that, St. Mary's 2021 Community Health Needs Assessment identified improving access to care as the hospital's No. 1 priority. "After researching the need and our ability to meet it, we knew that attaining a trauma designation was the best move for our community," says Randy Castillo, St. Mary's chief executive. "Achieving Level IV will help us address and tackle some of the most pressing issues facing patients and health care professionals in the High Desert." The Inland Counties Emergency Medical Agency (ICEMA) approves traumadesignation applications for hospitals in San Bernardino, Inyo and Mono counties. St. Mary officials expect an announcement from ICEMA either this month or in November.

HELICOPTER SERVICE EXPANSION

Another important element of St. Mary's trauma care will be the hospital's partnership with REACH Air Medical Services, which provides two helicopters for patient transport. Currently, the helicopters are stationed at St. Mary during the day, but plans are underway to establish living quarters on the hospital's campus by January 2024, allowing the availability of a flight crew 24/7.

Every dedicated caregiver and physician at St. Mary understands the crucial role they play in the health and well-being of the High Desert community, and Wirtz knows the trauma designation will add yet another layer of high-quality care that benefits residents and saves lives. "We're going to continue to do what's right for the patients, but we want to be treated in the community in which they live, and we're going to do everything in our power to take care of our High Desert families," Dr. Wirtz says.

For more information, visit ICEMA at sbcounty.gov/icema.