

UF's Keeping Families Healthy program lets health-care students learn people skills while solving problems

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. - A University of Florida program that helps needy families and teaches health-care students the value of teamwork soon will have new funding from UF Health Science Center colleges.

In July, the Keeping Families Healthy program will begin receiving part of a \$100,000 fund provided by UF's colleges of Dentistry, Health Professions, Medicine and Pharmacy through a two-year agreement that has each college contributing \$25,000 per year to promote interdisciplinary education. Students from all four colleges will participate in the program during 2003-04.

Funding from the colleges will help replace private grants ending June 30, said Richard Davidson, M.D., an alumni distinguished professor of medicine and director of the program. The state Area Health Education Centers system will provide an additional \$50,000 per year to fund Health Science Center interdisciplinary programs, which bring together students from different academic disciplines to work as teams, much like working professionals.

"We're grateful to the colleges and to AHEC for their contributions, and we're planning many enhancements to the program," said Davidson, who directs the UF College of Medicine's Office of Generalist Education. The office oversees Keeping Families Healthy and other interdisciplinary programs funded by Health Science Center colleges.

The new funding will enable Keeping Families Healthy to provide better services to local families, from recruitment to case management, said Rhondda Waddell, M.S.W., associate director for the program, which targets medically underserved people in Alachua County.

As one of the nation's largest programs of its kind, Keeping Families Healthy helps 150 volunteer families each year, totaling about 300 people, Waddell said. Each family is matched with a team of students from several colleges, who make home visits throughout the year to gather health data and develop a "prevention prescription" for one family member to promote health maintenance or disease prevention, she said.

The prescription establishes realistic goals and an action plan that can focus on anything from weight loss to health insurance coverage to home improvement, Waddell said. Students are expected to help implement the plan and follow up to assess the family member's compliance. Pairs of UF faculty from the colleges supervise the teams, and social workers provide logistical support.

"The students get very creative," she said. "But the family members are the main decision-makers in determining what the students will do."

Established in its current form in 1999 when smaller service learning programs at UF's colleges of Medicine, Nursing and Pharmacy joined forces, Keeping Families Healthy is now one of the largest efforts of its type among the nation's universities, Davidson said.

In the 2002-03 academic year, more than 400 UF health professions, medical, nursing and pharmacy students participated in Keeping Families Healthy. Some changes are in store for the fall - the program will be renamed Interdisciplinary Family Health, and UF dental students will join in for the first time, but nursing students will not participate this year.

Students benefit greatly from working with real patients, said Randell E. Doty, Pharm.D., a UF clinical associate professor of pharmacy practice and another of the program's core faculty.

"It's one thing to give case studies, it's another to have someone right there in front of them," Doty said. "We want them to understand early on that they're in a professional school and they'll be doing this their whole careers."

For Gainesville couple Patricia and James Dees, Keeping Families Healthy was a financial lifeline during a year of crisis. Both unable to work because of multiple health problems, the Dees exhausted their savings and sold many of their possessions to make ends meet. Waddell met the couple last June, and with the aid of a student team assigned in September, she helped the Dees fund basic living expenses, find low-priced medical care and secure disability benefits for Patricia Dees.

"We were in it about as deep as you can get, and without (the program) we never would have been able to survive," said Patricia Dees, 56.

Now, with the Dees' finances stabilizing and the academic year ending, the members of the student team - medical student Jennifer Roeser, nursing student Erin Kokomoor and pharmacy student Lou Gill - have completed their involvement with Keeping Families Healthy, but the experience will shape their outlook as health-care professionals.

"Working with the Dees made me realize that being a doctor is not just treating a patient," said Roeser, who plans to practice pediatric oncology. "You get involved with them, and how they're living their lives."