

HCHF, Dogwood Trust join forces for new health center

Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation and Dogwood Health Trust have joined forces in support of expanding primary care services on the plateau through establishment of Blue Ridge Health – Highlands Cashiers, a new health center which will open in late June.

“We could not be more grateful to Dogwood Health Trust for partnering with us as an initial funder of our current highest priority,” said Robin Tindall, HCHF CEO. “We hope that our generous donor community will join Dogwood in supporting primary care on the plateau, and we look forward to introducing everyone to new physicians in the weeks and months ahead.”

HCHF has made strides toward its mission to improve the health and well-being of Highlands, Cashiers and surrounding communities. Since February 2019, the foundation has awarded over \$3 million in grants to 75 organizations and has also led extensive efforts to decrease the spread of COVID-19 across the plateau through school screenings, community testing, and COVID-19 vaccination clinics.

As these measures continue to benefit communities throughout the

area, the foundation is now turning its attention to resolving a problem that has plagued the plateau: insufficient access to primary healthcare services.

Like many rural areas across the country, in recent years the plateau has experienced significant difficulty recruiting and retaining primary care practitioners. In the past decade, eight of ten local physicians have stopped practicing on the plateau.

A shortage of physicians can have dire consequences for the communities affected – a reality that was underscored during local listening sessions conducted by the foundation.

Without exception, every participating organization cited limited access to affordable healthcare as being among the top three contributors to systemic community problems.

Given its reach and capacity, the foundation was equipped to respond and help resolve this problem. Following a thorough needs assessment and extensive research over the course of two years, a collaborative solution was conceived, and plans are now well underway for the opening of Blue Ridge Health – Highlands Cashiers, a comprehensive

“ HCHF has put together an innovative solution to increase access to healthcare in its surrounding rural communities. ”

Dr. Susan Mims
CEO of Dogwood Health Trust

family medicine center operated by Blue Ridge Health in collaboration with Mountain Area Health Education Center where, as a Rural Teaching Practice, UNC School of Medicine students, and MAHEC Family Practice Residents and many others will become acquainted with the unique community while providing quality primary care during their rural rotations.

At a time when fewer than three percent of North Carolina’s medical school graduates choose to practice in rural areas, the plateau has benefitted from the steadfast care provided by Dr. Patti Wheeler and Dr. Scott Baker who have delivered dedicated care for many years through

their respective family medicine practices in Highlands.

“Dr. Wheeler and Dr. Baker have been the saving grace of family medicine on the plateau, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude,” said Dr. Richard Ellin, HCHF board member and head of the committee charged with addressing the plateau’s shortage of primary care practitioners.

The plateau area’s rural location and demographic makeup factor into its designation by the Health Resources and Services Administration as both a Healthcare Provider Shortage Area and a Medically Underserved Area. These designations are indicators that at current levels, the number of physicians does not meet the plateau’s population health needs.

“HCHF has put together an innovative solution to increase access to healthcare in its surrounding rural communities,” said Dr. Susan Mims, Interim CEO of Dogwood Health Trust. “With Dogwood’s health and wellness strategic priority in mind, we are pleased to partner in this collaborative initiative by partially funding the first-year start-up costs to grow the number of provid-

ers serving the rural Highlands Cashiers Plateau area, and to expand access to the broad range of services offered by Blue Ridge Health.”

The health center, located between Cashiers and Highlands on the hospital campus in the Jane Woodruff Clinic, will serve patients with two physicians whose combined experience and skill sets make them a synergistic pair and a perfect addition to the mountain’s medical community. Ann Davis, MD has been a family medicine doctor for 10 years, with five years of experience as a teacher for medical residents. Kristy Fincher, DO will treat all patients from infants to seniors. Dr. Fincher has extensive experience in sports medicine and a love of treating the whole family.

“Dogwood’s grant of \$300,000 is especially appreciated as it lays a solid foundation for the additional financial support that will be needed to get the health center up and running,” said Tindall.

HCHF will seek donations from the community to fulfill its “Leap of Faith” five-year commitment to financially support the health center. Visit www.hchealthfund.org for more information.