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HEALTH CARE CALL

Physician assistant graduate program planned for the Mount; Daughters of Charity to host

By Mary Grace Keller mkeller@newspost.com

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Mount St. Mary's University physician assistant graduate program Director Mary Jackson and the university's Executive Vice President Kraig Sheetz stand near the entrance to the E wing of the St. Joseph House in Emmitsburg on the campus adjoining the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on South Seton Avenue. The Mount plans to utilize a wing of the building for a graduate studies classroom and labs once interior renovations have been done.

Staff photo by Bill Green

Mount St. Mary's University is in the process of launching a physician assistant graduate degree that is expected to be the start of a new health professions graduate school.

Mount officials say the demand for physician assistants (PA) is high, and thanks to a neighbor up the road, students will learn how to meet this need under a unique roof.

An unused wing at the Daughters of Charity Emmitsburg campus, on the same grounds as the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, will be renovated inside to house the Mount's health professions graduate school. The Daughters of Charity campus is just 2 miles north of the university.

"It's a wing we didn't need, so it's perfect for this use," said Belinda Davis, communications director for the Daughters of Charity.

The Mount hopes to start with a cohort of 40 students in the PA program by the fall of 2023, according to program director Mary Jackson. The projected curriculum would include 111 credits over 24 months. The goal is to have a staff of eight, to include active PAs and a medical director who is a physician.

A physician assistant is a medical professional who diagnoses illness, develops and manages treatment plans, prescribes medications and often serves as a patient's principal healthcare provider, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants.

Considering their centuries-long dedication to serving the sick, the Sisters are thrilled to know the wing will be used in this way.

"They're all in," Davis said.

Since 2019, Jackson has been helping the university launch the program. She's a physician assistant, a 2005 Mount graduate, has 13 years of experience in emergency medicine and has been an adjunct faculty member for the past decade.

She said the demand for PAs is on the upswing, nationally and locally.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts the national job outlook for PAs to grow 31 percent by 2030, and Jackson said the 10-year outlook is close to 40 percent for Maryland.

As it prepares to open the health professions graduate school, the Mount has plans in place to try to combat disparities in health care and education.

Students will be required to have a set number of rotations in underserved areas or with underrepresented patients, Jackson said, and a scholarship program is expected to provide scholarships to students who wouldn't normally have them.

"We talk about serving, providing health care in underserved communities, we also want to give students from underserved communities an opportunity to be that health care provider," Kraig Sheetz, executive vice president for the Mount, said.

In building its PA program, the Mount also wants to proactively address the burnout that's become especially evident among health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jackson said students will be exposed to techniques and skills to promote self care and mindfulness they can hopefully use in the field.

"We want to take those same principles that address the inequities that we know exist in health care," Jackson said, "and prepare our students to care well for everyone and to thrive in challenging work environments by helping them to develop a heart of service and a skill set that allows them to promote things like advocacy, funding, and improve these different clinical settings."

Looking ahead, Sheetz said the Mount's existing graduate degree in applied behavior analysis would also be brought into the health professions graduate school. He said the university wants to grow and is considering adding other specialty graduate programs, too, perhaps in nursing.

Before applications can open, the Mount has a few more steps to take. The university is in the process of receiving approval from the Maryland Higher Education Commission, then will turn to the Accreditation Review Commission for Physician Assistants.

There are only four accredited PA programs in Maryland, which Jackson said leaves an unmet need of 174 PA graduates annually, citing U.S. Department of Labor statistics.

"We really feel that we are rising to meet that need," Jackson said, "to help the health care of Marylanders."

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