

# Fresno family medicine residency program won't enroll a third class

By Barbara Anderson

- Federal funds are disappearing for health center-based programs: A Fresno family residency program will not enroll four doctors this spring in what would have been its third class.
- Sierra Vista Family Medicine Residency Program in Fresno needs \$2.4 million over the next three years to have a third class of students.
- Health center residency programs in primary care are hugely popular with doctors: A Fresno program got 791 applications for four slots.
- Health center residency programs in Bakersfield and Modesto safe for now.

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A Fresno medical residency program is losing federal funds and won't be enrolling a third class of students this spring.

Friday was the deadline nationwide to sign up doctors-in-training programs, but on Thursday, a Fresno nonprofit organization pulled the plug on plans to enroll a freshman class of medical residents.

The new class would have joined residents enrolled in the three-year [Sierra Vista Family Medicine Residency Program](#) that began in 2012. Training continues for four students who are in their second year of training and for another four in their first year.

Suspending the third class of medical residents is a setback for the program that hopes to train and keep primary care doctors in the central San Joaquin Valley, an area long afflicted by a shortage of doctors.

"It was horribly heart-wrenching and heartbreaking to make this decision," said Stephen Schilling, vice president of the [Fresno Healthy Communities Access Partners](#) board and CEO of [Clinica Sierra Vista](#). Healthy Communities handles the money to run the residency program, and Clinica, which operates health centers in Fresno and Bakersfield, provides space at its Divisadero Street center.

Healthy Communities had no choice but to drop the third class, Schilling said. Federal funding for health center-based programs is set to end June 2016, and so far there has been little sign that the funding will be restored. To train the family medicine residents costs \$150,000 per resident, per year. The program would need \$2.4 million, over a three-year period to seat a third class, he said.

The Sierra Vista Family Medicine Residency program is one of 60 nationwide that are based at community health centers and face the loss of [Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education](#) funds. Most family medicine residencies are based in hospitals, where residents treat acute health problems, but the health center programs train residents in clinics that emphasize primary care. Funding for the doctor training was included in the Affordable Care Act and was seen as a way to build a primary-care workforce to meet the care needs of millions of newly insured individuals.

"All of the programs are in health professional shortage areas," said Cristine Serrano, executive director of the American Association of Teaching Health Centers. And, she said: "All of the programs nationally are at serious risk of

closing down.”

### Funds popular and depleted

Two Valley-based residency programs are in better shape than the one in Fresno, and new classes of residents have been matched and will begin training soon.

A [Bakersfield residency program](#) that Clinica Sierra Vista took over from Kern County has six new residents ready to join six already in training, Schilling said.

Kern County agreed to an eight-year commitment to the program when it started in July 2014, he said. The cost to the county will be in excess of \$1 million for next year, he said.

In Modesto, a residency program that was the first of its kind in California also has been able to avoid any drastic cuts. The [Valley Family Medicine Residency of Modesto](#) is affiliated with Doctors Medical Center, which provides a separate source of federal funding for the residents’ training.

But losing Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education funds is a concern. “It does have the potential to impact us at some point, unless funding is restored,” said Dr. Kathleen Kearns, the residency program director in Modesto.

Teaching health center funds have been widely sought as they are about the only substantial source of funding for new primary-care residency positions. There’s no federal money to expand established graduate medical education programs. For example, the University of California at San Francisco has operated a family residency program in Fresno for more than 35 years and has been limited to 11 students each year.

The federal government received so many applications for health center-based programs that the \$230 million that was allocated in 2010 — and was supposed to last five years — has run out more quickly than expected, Serrano said. Only \$50 million remains, she said, and so the amount that health centers are getting per resident this year will be cut almost in half to \$70,000 per student instead of \$150,000.

Continuing programs with half the funding will be nearly impossible, Serrano said. “I would say 99% of the programs cannot operate on \$70,000 per resident.”

### Doctors staying in communities

Nationwide, center-based residency programs appear to be accomplishing what they are intended to do — keep doctors in communities that need them. This past July, preliminary data of 34 graduates found 85% planned to remain in the underserved communities where they were trained, Serrano said.

The programs are widely popular among medical graduates looking for primary-care residencies, said Norma Forbes, executive director of Fresno Healthy Communities Access Partners. The agency received 791 applications for the four slots that it had available for the third class, she said.

The San Joaquin Valley likely will be home for Dr. Arvin Fuentes, a second-year doctor-in-training at the Sierra Vista Family Residency Program, when he completes his training next year.

“There is a need for primary care physicians in the Valley and I would like to stay in the Valley,” he said. Fuentes, a native of the Philippines, has family in Bakersfield.

Fellow second-year resident Tahmina Rahman, who is also from Bakersfield, echoed Fuentes’ feelings. “I love to work in an underserved area and I know this area, I have connections,” she said.

Schilling said it’s no accident that the residents in the Fresno residency program have Valley roots. “We selected kids

in our program that are absolute Valley-based kids,” he said.

Fresno residents are upset by the decision to scrub a third-year class.

“All the residents are a little bit sad today,” Rahman, 35, said Thursday. “It’s a loss for the community and I really feel bad about that.”

Schilling has assured the first- and second-year residents that their training will continue, but he knows their confidence has been shaken. “Their spots are OK,” he said, “but they’re not going to have a class behind them that they get to help teach, and they like to work together as a team. It’s a very rich learning environment to have all the classes there at different levels.”

He said he’s not going to give up on efforts to get funding for a third class of residents. The program has received about \$100,000 from state Song-Brown funds, and there are efforts in Congress to secure federal funding. But he hopes the community will step forward.

Fuentes, 40, holds that same hope: “The community could actually help out and fund the program,” he said. “It’s designed to give back to the community.”

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