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VA Amps Up Recruiting, Adds Resident Slots to Meet High Demand

By Tiffani Sherman

The early years of a physician's career are measured in milestones and the career path is clearly set. The Department of Veterans Affairs is working hard to promote itself and make working for the VA attractive to medical professionals.

"I believe the biggest driver in working for the VA is the mission," said Russ Pearl, associate director for health care recruitment at the Veterans Health Administration. "They're going to provide care for the people who served this country."

The VA is looking for thousands of doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to work within its network of hospitals and clinics around the country. As many students pursue training in specialties, the system is feeling the national shortage of general care and mental health professionals.

To attract new recruits, the VA has increased its presence at conferences and on social media and has also increased hiring incentives and salaries. "I believe they are comparable," Pearl said, adding "it is rarely the salary that is the driving influencer; their decision to take care of veterans is the main influencer."

The pay scale for most primary care, internal medicine and family care physicians within the VA ranges from \$98,967 to \$215,000 annually. Doctors in some specialties can earn up to \$385,000. Compensation varies depending on several factors, including location, years of experience and training.

That's somewhat lower than private practice, even after salaries were bumped \$20,000 to \$30,000 last year. According to a survey of more than 80,000 practicing physicians and more than 40,000 newly graduated physicians by the company Profiles, the median starting salary for an internal medicine physician is \$145,000 and for a physician practicing for six years is \$212,790.

But the VA has another enticement. To sweeten its deal, the VA is offering a fast-track to get out of debt. The secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs has increased the education debt assistance up to \$120,000, meaning student loans could be more quickly dispatched should a physician choose a career at the VA.

Licensing is also a perk of working at the VA, Pearl said. "A provider can have a valid and unrestricted license in one state and can practice at any VA in another state," he said. In the private sector, a doctor must be licensed in each state he or she practices in. "There is no other place where they will be able to practice anywhere in the country with a mission quite like ours."

That sense of duty and other factors could also keep some residents who work at the VA during their training around on a more permanent basis. "Resident physicians often choose to practice in the geographic area where they trained, may enjoy and feel gratified with their experience at VA, and may choose a career in VA," said Judy Brannen, MD, MBA, clinical director of undergraduate and graduate medical education at the Veterans Health Administration Office of Academic Affiliations. "That was my own experience, and I have practiced primary care at the Richmond, Virginia, VA Medical Center for more than 25 years," she said.

To help facilitate more residents, the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 authorized up to 1,500 new residents' slots during the next five years. Residents usually do not just work in VA facilities, they rotate through the system as part of their training with VA-affiliated hospitals. So the 1,500 slots mean more than 1,500 people. For each resident position funded by the VA, Brannen said, about 3.6 residents per year rotate through the facilities. That means for the 1,500 slots, about 5,400 people will rotate through. Beginning in July, 204 new resident slots will open at the VA with 200-325 additional slots opening each year for the next four years. Nationwide, the VA sponsors about 10,400 resident positions.

Increasing the number of resident slots will increase capacity at the VA. "The intent of the VACAA legislation is to increase veteran access to timely clinical care," Brannen said. "The emphasis in the legislation is to increase residency positions in primary care, mental health and areas of critical need, as well as rural areas and in VA sites with little or no graduate medical education. It's hoped that some of these resident physicians, who may not otherwise know about opportunities for careers at VA, will decide to apply for positions as VA physicians after their residency."

The VA is also promoting a sense of work and life balance, attempting to attract the physician who may be leaning toward private practice. "We offer flexible scheduling, and they get to focus exclusively on patient care," Pearl said, with no business or personnel matters typical in running a private practice. "Our providers get to focus their entire time on the job of taking care of others. It's the reward that comes with taking care of America's soldiers, sailors and airmen."

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