New MEDEX PA Program Focuses on Military Veterans

Educating a New Generation of PAs

BY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON AND AAPA STAFF

MEDEX NORTHWEST OPENED ITS NEWEST SITE ON THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA (UW TACOMA) CAMPUS IN SEPTEMBER.

The program is part of a national initiative to increase education and employment opportunities for returning military veterans and to boost the primary care workforce in rural and underserved areas.

"MEDEX Northwest is proud to be opening its newest site for 28 students on the campus of the University of Washington Tacoma," says Ruth Ballweg, MPA, PA-C, MEDEX Northwest section chief. "Our opening ceremony on Sept. 16 honored the entering students and the leaders throughout the community who have helped to make this happen.”

Over the course of its 44-year history, MEDEX has educated 1,787 PAs, 33 percent of whom were military veterans. Its mission is to educate PAs in primary care to serve rural and underserved populations.

MEDEX continues to focus on outreach to former mil-
Military medics and corpsmen.

The new UW Tacoma site joins existing MEDEX sites in Seattle and Spokane, Wash. and Anchorage, Alaska. The Madigan Army Medical Center, located on Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), will be one of the practicum sites for MEDEX students. The Tacoma campus is located within 15 miles of JBLM, which makes it an ideal location for the MEDEX program.

According to MEDEX, projected clinician shortages, especially in primary care, have a significant impact on rural and medically underserved populations. Identifying potential students from those populations, providing PA education close to home, and returning the new PAs to their communities for clinical training all increase the likelihood that they will practice in those communities. In addition, many military medics and corpsmen complete their service with experience that does not translate directly to a civilian healthcare profession. Their expertise will be underutilized without a career pathway that builds on their military training.

"Fourteen class members [of the initial class] come from military medical occupations," Ballweg says. "Many of these men and women have had multiple deployments in their recent careers. In addition, five of the students are military spouses. The rest of the students come primarily from rural communities in western Washington. These students have not previously had access to a PA education because of their family and community responsibilities."

U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer, of Washington’s 6th Congressional District, was the guest speaker at the opening ceremony. Other speakers included Marty Campbell, the deputy mayor of Tacoma; Tom Norris, MD, chair of the UW Department of Family Medicine; Sharon Fought, RN, PhD, director of nursing and health leadership at UW Tacoma; Terry Scott, MFA, PA-C, program director for MEDEX Northwest; and Debra Friedman, PhD, chancellor of UW Tacoma.

“We’re so pleased to work with UW Medicine to bring the MEDEX physician assistant training program to the South Sound,” Friedman says. “Expanding access to healthcare careers—with all of their challenges and rewards—is especially important for returning military personnel.”

In 2011, the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) gave funding priority to universities and colleges with physician assistant programs that actively recruit, retain and mentor military veterans. It was also seeking model programs that could be replicated across the country to increase the healthcare workforce. MEDEX Northwest received $887,301 from the federal agency to expand its program to Tacoma.

The funding allowed MEDEX Northwest to add 28 training slots to the UW Tacoma campus, which is actively engaged in outreach efforts to the returning military community and maintains a strong working relationship with JBLM.

“The PA profession, which began by training these military personnel, is an ideal career trajectory for them,” Ballweg says.