



Full-spectrum Medicine



Dr. Megan Olson Embraces Experience

Blazing the trail for the resident rural training track in Thermopolis

BY GAYLE M. IRWIN

Dr. Megan Olson is finishing her residency in Thermopolis as part of the rural training track. PHOTO BY PAUL RUHTER

Recognizing a need for family medicine doctors in small Wyoming communities, the University of Wyoming's Family Medicine Residency Program in Casper has developed a new rural training track to place its doctors-in-training in Thermopolis, and Megan Olson, MD, is the first resident to enter the program.

"National studies show residents who train in the rural training tracks, the majority of them—75 plus percent—are doing full-spectrum family medicine in a small town," said W. Travis Bomengen, MD, site director for rural track training in Thermopolis. "With that, and considering where we are in Wyoming with the age of our primary care forces in some of the smaller communities, we would like to try to do that for the state: recruit and keep some of our own."

The family medicine residents in the RTT spend their first year in Casper and then their second and third years in Thermopolis. Wyoming native and University of Wyoming graduate Dr. Megan Olson is blazing that trail ... and enjoying the journey.

"It's medicine like you don't see very many other places," the second-year resident said. "There are four family medicine doctors [in the community], and one general surgeon. They take care of the health of the entire community. The family medicine docs there not only see patients in-clinic, they rotate as hospitalists. They cover the emergency room. They deliver babies, they do C-sections. They go to the training rooms at the high school and do sports medicine. They're at the nursing homes. It's full-spectrum like I haven't seen anywhere else. I've really enjoyed it."

Learning full-spectrum medicine

Dr. Olson's day begins at Hot Springs Health Hospital, seeing patients and checking on any babies she delivered and their mothers. Afterward, she may spend time with a specialist, such as a cardiologist or orthopedic doctor, or have her own clinic. She also visits nursing homes and schools. Additionally, she takes a shift a week and one weekend a month at the hospital, including the emergency room. On Wednesdays, she travels to

Worland to hold a clinic.

"It's more of a true-life, what you would be doing once you're done with your residency experience," said Dr. Bomengen.

The variety appeals to Dr. Olson.

"One of the things I enjoy about the program in Thermopolis is that I get to do a little bit of everything every day," she said. "I like being in a place where the family medicine docs have the ability to cover everything."

She added, "I like the challenge of being out of your comfort zone, but you have to figure it out and do what's best for your patient—I find that really rewarding," Dr. Olson said. "That's something you don't get in a town like Cheyenne. I've been involved in some really amazing cases that many second-year residents wouldn't likely have been very involved in."

A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Community Facilities loan program assisted the Thermopolis rural track training program in many ways. The agency awarded \$21.3 million to the Hot Springs County Hospital District, "the largest Community Facilities loan awarded in Wyoming to-date," according to the agency. The hospital's expansion and



Drs. Travis Bomengen and Megan Olson are part of a small group of physicians who live and work in Thermopolis. PHOTO BY LISA BOMENGEN

Additional learning experience

In addition to serving Thermopolis residents and learning full-spectrum medicine, Dr. Olson has also traveled to larger cities to learn specialty skills, including emergency pediatrics in Denver and high-risk obstetrics in Spokane. Working with women, children and babies brings her deep satisfaction, she said.

"There's something about delivering a baby," Dr. Olson said. "Your hands are the first ones to touch that child. The joy that you see on mom's face—she works so hard, whether it's a vaginal delivery or a C-section. Just to have the honor to be there for that experience and for that life-changing moment for that family—it's really incredible!"

That word describes her residency experience so far.

"It's been incredible—that's the best word for it," she said. "I have a lot of autonomy there, which is really great for learning purposes. But I also get to run ideas past my supervising docs, and I get that instant feedback. The one-on-one time we get with our supervising doctors is really helpful. They're always there to make sure you're making good decisions and to catch you if you stumble."

She said she is considering doing another away-track for two weeks of NICU training, either in Billings or Denver to "be more comfortable taking care of those sick kiddos who need to be stabilized."

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renovation created all new patient care areas including new inpatient rooms, delivery suites, emergency rooms, trauma rooms, two new operating room suites and pre- and post-operative care areas.

"The USDA grant funding for the hospital project definitely had a positive impact on the RTT residency," said Dr. Bomengen. "The timing was coincidental that the new facility was finished as the first resident was arriving on site. But this definitely helped us with our recruitment as well as patient satisfaction."



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Adding another resident

A second resident will arrive in Thermopolis in 2022, he is currently training in Casper. Dr. Olson looks forward to welcoming him.

“There will be two of us instead of me by my lonesome,” she said. “We’ll bring some camaraderie to the program, and we’ll focus on the education side of things when there’s two of us.”

Another benefit: an additional medical professional.

“It’s more manpower in a small town, which is nice,” Dr. Olson said.

“Our goal is to train the residents for full-spectrum family medicine so they can go out and practice in a community like Thermopolis or Torrington, Wheatland, Newcastle or Worland,” Dr. Bomengen said. “We’re looking to populate the rural communities in Wyoming with well-trained physicians that are going to be there for the long haul.”



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Although he admitted not all residents trained through the rural track will stay in the state, the hope is they will set up practice in other small communities in the west.

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The Wyoming WWAMI medical school program also has a longitudinal training track for third year medical students in Thermopolis (the TRUST program) and so a year from now there will be a medical student as well as two family medicine residents training in Thermopolis.

Looking ahead

Dr. Olson envisions continuing the work she is currently doing in Thermopolis.

“When I picture my career after residency, honestly, it looks pretty similar to what I do now,” she said. “I would love to keep up the full-spectrum practice. I like clinic, I love seeing patients in the hospital. The OB is a huge thing for me. No matter what I do, I want to be delivering babies and doing C-sections because that is really fulfilling. It’s one of the favorite things I do in my job.”

Serving as a family medicine doctor has many rewards, Dr. Olson added.

“It’s such a unique opportunity to really serve the community,” she said. “You do that in multiple aspects of medicine, but you then get to see your patients in the grocery store, checking out at the gas station—it stretches far beyond the bounds of the hospital. A lot of the docs take care of their kids’ teachers or best friends—that’s a really unique side of things: how involved you are in the community in a program like this. That’s a really special thing and something that I really enjoy.”

She praises the program for the preparation toward her dream to become a doctor.

“I know I’ll walk away with excellent training, and I will be comfortable going out and doing full-spectrum medicine by the time I’m done,” Dr. Olson said. “I couldn’t be happier to be in this program and be the trailblazer, so to speak.”



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