The concept of having a PA program at the University of Nevada, Reno had been kicked about since the late 1990s, says Brian Lauf, the program’s founding director. The conversation had been percolating over the years before being kicked off in 2015.

Lauf created the curriculum for the program and hired five additional non-tenured faculty to work out of the Nell J. Redfield building at Wedge Parkway in South Reno, although the summer semester is held at the main college campus.

**IMPROVING REGIONAL HEALTHCARE ACCESS**

UNR Med’s PA program is one of many such healthcare training programs geared toward improving regional healthcare access and creating a pipeline of trained medical professionals to work in regional healthcare facilities and private practice clinics.

Students who train locally often work locally, and with Nevada lagging behind much of the country for access to healthcare and primary care providers per capita, the PA program can help improve those key metrics by increasing access to primary care services, especially in underserved rural and metropolitan areas.

Prior to the program’s creation, the nearest available PA program was in Sacramento. PAs can expand on current services as well as establish new services, Lauf says. They typically work as a team with physicians to deliver care across all specialties of medicine and practice locations and have many of the same responsibilities as physicians. Like nurse practitioners, PAs see their own patients and work in clinics, hospitals, emergency rooms and operating rooms.

“Any place you can imagine a physician, there may be a PA there as well,” Lauf says. “This program will help establish Nevada from its almost last place nationwide (in access to primary care services) by expanding healthcare services to all the communities across Nevada.”

The primary challenge, he adds, was establishing a new program within UNR Med, which historically had only offered an M.D. program.

While PA students come from various backgrounds, all meet the requisite 2,000 hours of on-the-job health-related experience. The program is split into 13 months of didactic classroom-based training and 12 months of clinical experience in community healthcare facilities.

The first class is slated to graduate in August 2020. By way of comparison, MDs must complete a residency after their master’s level work that can take anywhere from an additional three to seven years.

**GROWING A LOCAL WORKFORCE IN NURSING, DENTISTRY**

UNR Med’s PA program isn’t the only regional healthcare educational program with a lengthy waiting list. Marie Murgolo, vice president of academic affairs at Truckee Meadows Community College, says the community college’s various allied health and nursing programs are quite competitive with lengthy waiting lists for a limited number of seats.

“We tend to see fully enrolled programs in these areas,” Murgolo says. “We don’t see huge growth because of the limited spots, although we have been able to accept higher numbers in some of the most sought-after programs, such as nursing and dental assisting.”

Expanding TMCC’s allied health programs requires more than just adding curriculum, Murgolo says. Unlike adding another English course to a semester’s offerings, expanding health-related programs requires bringing in additional beds, classroom space, simulation rooms and other resource-intensive instructional tools.

Many programs at TMCC have stackable credentials — students who enroll in the Certified Nursing Assistant program can easily segue into the Registered Nurse program. TMCC this fall added a B.S. degree in dental assisting. It also offers a B.S. in emergency management and homeland security, a popular degree pathway for students working as paramedics and EMTs.

“We look to expand in other areas as opportunities arise,” Murgolo says. “The strength of TMCC is the ability to train students for careers and to prepare students for continuing education regardless of their educational goals.”

**RELYING ON THE EXPERTS**

One reason why TMCC fills an important role in training the region’s healthcare workforce, Murgolo notes, is that the majority of graduates end up working at private practice offices and medical facilities throughout the Truckee Meadows.

“It’s very important for TMCC to be a leader in these educational opportunities,” she says. “There is a huge amount of growth in healthcare because we have an aging population. We need more medical professionals in nursing, dental and all the different health sciences. We work closely with industry partners to ensure the training we provide is the most up-to-date education, with a focus on leading-edge technology.

“The experts in the community really support frequent updates to the programs to (ensure) the most pertinent educational experience for that profession,” she adds. “We provide a wide pipeline, and the industry appreciates that and that’s why they support us through advisory boards and by providing clinical opportunities.”

The educational foundation students receive at TMCC allows them to either directly enter the workforce with an associate’s degree or certificate, or continue their education at a four-year university. Students in high school who want to pursue allied health careers also can earn dual credit and get ahead in their college coursework, which cuts down the time to degree.

Other Northern Nevada institutions that provide healthcare training programs include Western Nevada College, Car- rington College, Career College of Northern Nevada and Great Basin College. These programs typically culminate in an associate’s degree or diploma. UNR’s Orvis School of Nursing, meanwhile, offers degree programs ranging from a Bachelor of Science in Nursing to Doctor of Nurse Practice, the terminal degree for the nursing profession.