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Ponce Health Sciences University Attracts Top-Tier Medical Researchers to Address Growing Health Disparities Among Hispanics

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By:

Sarah Herring

PONCE, PUERTO RICO--(Marketwired - Nov 12, 2015) - The Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU), a fully accredited U.S. medical school, has announced the hiring of two leading researchers to address growing disparities among Hispanics and other minorities in the United States. Dr. Harold Saavedra, cancer biologist from Emory University, and Dr. Devin Mueller, neuroscientist of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, both have been awarded prestigious RO1 grants by the National Institutes of Health, which will be the basis of their work at Ponce Research Institute.

The Centers for Disease Control report growing disparities that impact Hispanics compared to non-Hispanic whites, such as increased rates of asthma, obesity, and diabetes. As the Hispanic population continues to grow -- it is expected to account for 31% of the U.S. population by 2060 -- PHSU is expanding its research to inform medical practice in U.S. hospitals.

"We are working to attract the best researchers, who share our commitment to solving the most pressing health challenges for the Hispanic community," said Dr. Kenira Thompson, President of the Ponce Research Institute. "By expanding our research team and facilities, we are not only contributing to an important body of research that will serve Hispanics across the U.S., we are also bringing an influx of investment and job opportunities to our community."

The hiring of Dr. Saavedra and Dr. Mueller marks a major investment to improve education, research, and job creation on the island. The expansion of the Ponce Research Institute is made possible through $2 million grant from the Researchers Startup Funds Program, an initiative of the Puerto Rico Science and Technology Trust. The Trust's mission is to invest, facilitate, and build capacity to continually advance Puerto Rico's economy and its citizens' well-being through innovation-driven enterprises, science and technology, and its industrial base. The Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO) also contributed towards the construction of state-of-the-art research facilities for these investigators. As a result of these ongoing initiatives, PHSU will expand its research facilities and hire an additional 15-20 researchers and staff.

"The Ponce Research Institute is the driving engine in medical innovation and medical treatment here in Puerto Rico," said Lucy Crespo, Chief Executive Officer of the Puerto Rico Science and Technology Trust. "We are proud to extend their mission through this investment strategy, and look forward to the impact and influence their research will have on the island and the rest of the U.S."

In addition to Dr. Saavedra and Dr. Mueller, the university has also hired Dr. Patricia Casbas, a molecular pathologist studying breast cancer genetics from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Dr. Guillermo Armaiz, an ovarian cancer biologist from MD Anderson. Both will join Ponce as junior researchers.

"Puerto Rico is uniquely positioned to help address global health challenges, and we're committed to providing the infrastructure necessary to advance new discoveries in the field while also improving health and education opportunities here," said José Iguina, Director of the Life Sciences Division at Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company. "Ponce Health Sciences University is a natural partner to help carry out that vision."

PHSU's new hires and lab expansion reflect the university's historic commitment to research and innovation. PHSU is home to the largest genome-mapping database of Hispanics in the U.S., and the university is a recipient of the esteemed NIH U54 grant, focused on reducing Hispanic cancer health disparities.

"This public-private partnership allows us to advance important medical research with implications across the U.S., while also investing in our local community," said Dr. David Lenihan, PHSU President. "We are grateful for the support of the PR Science and Technology Trust and PRIDCO, and through the investment, we will continue to hire world-renowned researchers and faculty like

Dr. Saavedra and Dr. Mueller."

ABOUT PONCE HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY
Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU) is dedicated to providing the highest quality graduate education programs available in medicine, clinical psychology, biomedical sciences, and public health in order to prepare world-class, culturally competent health professionals to better serve a growing population of Hispanic patients across the United States. Located in Ponce, Puerto Rico, PHSU is recognized both in Puerto Rico and abroad for its educational service and research achievements.

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