

From Special Ops to Future Docs: Medical School Assists Veterans Transitioning to Medical Careers

HEMPSTEAD, NY, USA, June 14, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The [Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell](#) and [Special Operations Forces to School of Medicine](#) (SOFToSOM) are proud to announce a collaborative effort to support United States military veterans in their journey to become physicians. This new partnership advances SOFToSOM's mission to provide a pathway for Special Operations Forces (SOF) to enter the field of medicine as non-traditional applicants, ultimately enriching the medical field with diverse physicians to serve an increasingly diverse population. The Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell is the first medical institution to partner with SOFToSOM in this endeavor.

"We are pleased to partner with SOFToSOM, an organization that shares our vision of creating improved pathways for diverse groups to enter the field of medicine and enhance healthcare throughout the United States and the globe," said David Battinelli, MD, dean and Betsey Cushing Whitney professor of Medicine at the Zucker School of Medicine, and executive vice president and physician-in-chief for Northwell Health. "U.S. Special Operations Forces service members embody values inherent in physician leaders, such as excellence and service to others. We are committed to helping them pursue their dreams of entering the medical field and ultimately improving the health and well-being of the communities they serve."

SOFToSOM is the first non-profit organization dedicated to aiding Special Operators in their



U.S. Navy SEALs exhibition - parachuter (right) is an SOFToSOM scholar and future doctor. Photo credit: NSW Free Fall Team.

medical education pursuits. Scholars are identified using selection protocols developed by Special Operations veterans and operational psychologists who have been involved with selection for NASA. SOFtoSOM offers these scholars valuable opportunities to conduct research before entering medical school, as well as mentorship and financial assistance. Under this initiative, the Zucker School of Medicine has committed to assisting qualifying SOF applicants who have completed the SOFtoSOM program with navigating the medical school application process and providing interview opportunities. One of the most diverse medical schools in the country, the Zucker School of Medicine's small class sizes and student-centered learning environment make it an ideal setting for veterans to thrive. Ricky Ditzel Jr., chairman and co-founder of SOFtoSOM, underscored the importance of this new partnership.

"In the Special Operations community, we live by the motto: Humans are more important than hardware," said Ditzel, a U.S. Army Special Operations Flight Paramedic currently pursuing a

career as a physician. "We are proud to share this commitment to our people with the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell. This collaboration will enrich the healthcare system by introducing highly skilled and resilient physician-leaders from our SOF veterans. The medical school's unwavering dedication to the communities it serves ensures that together, we will enhance the quality and diversity of healthcare across the nation. We look forward to working together to create a brighter future for healthcare."

SOF are military units comprised of elite U.S. soldiers across all military branches trained to execute high-stress missions, often in covert and sensitive environments. Its members possess unparalleled dedication, commitment to excellence, integrity, and adaptability. Despite these qualities, less than 2% of veterans are represented in the medical field, while about 8% of the



Members of the U.S. Army Special Forces Green Berets on deployment care for an infant. Photo credit: Alex Manne.



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U.S. population comprises veterans, according to the 2021 U.S. Census. Ditzel noted several barriers to SOF entry into medicine, including challenges in completing the personal statement and accomplishments section of the application due to the “Quiet Professional” stigma within SOF, where sharing stories or seeking affirmation for individual success is frowned upon. Additionally, SOF applicants often lack advisors to help with the application process and manage timelines and deadlines due to their training, familial obligations, and deployment schedules.

As a member of the U.S. military and a graduate of the Zucker School of Medicine, Christopher Petersen, MD, '22, knows all too well about the challenges veterans face when applying for and attending medical school. In gratitude for his education and his positive experience as a non-traditional student, he now mentors SOFtoSOM scholars. “From the start, the Zucker School of Medicine was gracious in allowing me to navigate medical school as a veteran – providing assistance and mentors at each step along the way,” said Dr. Petersen, underscoring his appreciation for the efforts of the instructors, physicians, and administrative staff in maximizing students’ future potential within the healthcare system to provide excellent patient-centered care. He praised the school’s many opportunities for ‘non-traditional’ students to learn, lead, and become involved, whether in the clinical setting, research, or the institution's strategic direction.

“I am ecstatic that SOFtoSOM was created to further educate and strengthen SOF service members in preparation for their transition to medical school and beyond. I am humbled that these two great organizations have directly intertwined to recognize the contributions that SOF members will make within the medical school community and as future physicians. This relationship will continue to have an impact within both organizations and, more importantly, their communities, for many years to come.”

To date, 30 scholars have completed the SOFtoSOM program and are currently medical students, accepted medical students, or future applicants. With partnerships like the one between SOFtoSOM and the Zucker School of Medicine, these veterans can continue serving their communities as physicians and healthcare leaders, ensuring their unique skills and experiences contribute to a healthier, stronger nation.

For more information about the program, visit SOFtoSOM.org. You can also learn more on the Zucker School of Medicine website: medicine.hofstra.edu.

About the Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell
Established in 2008, the Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell was founded by two equal partners: Hofstra University and Northwell Health. The School of Medicine is built upon the strong clinical and graduate medical education programs of Northwell, as well as the robust research and academic programs of both Hofstra and Northwell’s Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research. For more information, visit medicine.hofstra.edu.

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