

MaineHealth

MaineHealth Local Health Systems

Franklin Community
Health Network
LincolnHealth
MaineHealth Care At Home
Maine Behavioral Healthcare
Memorial Hospital
Maine Medical Center
Mid Coast-Parkview Health
NorDx
Pen Bay Medical Center
Southern Maine Health Care
Synernet
Waldo County General Hospital
Western Maine Health

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MaineGeneral Health
New England Rehabilitation
Hospital of Portland
St. Mary's Health System

Testimony of Jo Linder, M.D., Assistant Dean for Students for the Tufts University School of Medicine Maine Medical Center Maine Track Program

in Support of LD 273, An Act To Sustain the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program

Tuesday, February 23, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business. I am Jo Ellen Linder, M.D., from Falmouth and the Assistant Dean for Students for the Tufts University School of Medicine Maine Medical Center Maine Track Program. I am here today in strong support of LD 273, “An Act To Sustain the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program.”

Since 2008, I have had the privilege to play a leadership role in the Maine Track program, serving in my current role since the Fall of 2010. I have had many opportunities to get to know each and every Maine Track student, in countless conversations and correspondence, from the time they apply to medical school, and throughout their years as a student. You will hear today from several of these incredibly talented, dedicated individuals and from many more who wrote statements that have been submitted online.

Background

Like many rural states, Maine has a shortage of physicians. This challenge is exacerbated by the age of our physician workforce. In more than half of Maine’s counties, and particularly our rural counties, the physician workforce exceeds an average age of 55. This shortage presents particular challenges as we seek ways to improve the health of our rural communities.

While there are many reasons for the shortage, two stand out in particular: 1. Maine is one of only 6 states that does not have a state-sponsored medical school; and 2. The cost of private or out-of-state tuition at medical school oftentimes requires students to accrue large debt if they pursue a career in medicine at all. Per the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the median education debt for indebted medical school graduates in 2019 was over \$200,000, and 73% of graduates reported having education debt.

In an effort to address this problem in an innovative way, in 2008, Maine Medical Center (MMC) partnered with the Tufts University School of Medicine (TUSM) to start a unique program designed to serve Maine students close to home. At the time, Maine ranked 49th in the rate of residents who entered medical school. The TUSM MMC *Maine Track* program, based on the highly successful program in Washington State, was founded with three goals in mind:

- To address the shortage of physicians in Maine, and particularly physicians in our rural areas;
- To make available access to high quality and affordable medical education for Maine's best and brightest students; and
- To develop an innovative curriculum focused on rural medicine and community-based education to best meet the needs of our state.

The unique MMC-TUSM partnership offers a rigorous training program that exposes students to rural clinical practice from day one and provides students firsthand experience providing care in local communities throughout the state including such towns as Madison, Caribou, Belfast, Wiscasset, Richmond, and Norway. Most importantly, in an effort to ensure that Maine students have access to medical education at a cost on

par with that of a state school, Maine Medical Center guarantees that at least 20 Maine students in each class receive scholarships for \$25,000 each year with the intent of providing an education at a similar cost to in-state tuition for public medical schools. The goals are to ensure that these students have access to affordable medical education, and by graduating with less debt, are more likely to enter primary care and other specialties that are lower-compensated, but critically important to serving the population.

The Doctors for Maine's Future Program

In 2009, the 124th Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs appropriated approximately \$3 million to fund a scholarship program at FAME for Maine students who attend medical school in a Maine-based program. I am here today to tell you that the Legislature's investment is paying off with huge dividends, and ask you to continue the support for scholarships.

Details

The Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship program in the bill before you today provides tuition scholarships of \$25,000 per year, per qualifying student at University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine (UNECOM) and Tufts *Maine Track*, or a total of \$100,000 per student over the course of completing a four-year medical school program. This represents a significant portion of tuition costs over four years at TUSM and UNECOM.

And this is a unique public/private partnership between the State and the medical schools. The Doctors for Maine's Future program requires that Maine Medical Center and University of New England privately raise dollar for dollar matching funds to support additional medical students. For example, when 4 per medical students qualify for state-funded

scholarships, Maine Medical Center raises and matches private funds for another 4 student scholars in the same program.

As I mentioned earlier, Maine Medical Center is committed to providing scholarships for at least 20 Maine students per year. The Doctors for Maine's Future scholarships provide an important incentive for our philanthropic donors as they see the State invest its scarce resources in the future health of our communities.

Results!

And it's working! You will hear compelling testimony from Maine Track graduates and students, plus several alumni and current medical students have submitted letters of support online. From the eight classes of *Maine Track* alumni to date, 40 are now practicing (while others continue postgraduate training or are serve in the military). This unique program, with a foundation of rural health care and affordable medical education, has produced promising results.

- **45% of the practicing graduates who completed training and have no military commitment, practice in Maine. Of the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholars who have finished training, 56% are currently practicing in Maine (9 out of 16).** This is comparable with the most successful rural focused medical education in the country.
- 64% of our students call Maine "home",
- **More than 50% of graduates initially match in a primary care specialty** (Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, and Pediatrics).

The outcomes of the *Maine Track* and UNECOM programs – practicing in primary care, practicing in a rural community, and practicing in an underserved area – are desperately needed if we hope to grow and maintain access to necessary primary care for your constituents throughout

Maine. In many areas across the country, medical student choice and interest in these important outcomes have fallen well below the thresholds necessary to maintain the physician workforce in primary care and underserved settings, threatening to enhance an existing workforce maldistribution. Students with the ability to access successful debt reducing programs like the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship program are much more likely to later practice and remain in primary care, and more importantly, stay in Maine. We also now have clear evidence that our student selection process and curriculum are just as important in producing local primary care physicians. **MMC, TUSM and the Maine Track community hospitals believe that the financial support of medical education scholarships through the Doctors for Maine's Future program is a strategic investment by the State of Maine in our future health care workforce and, in turn, the health of our communities.**

For the reasons above, I urge the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 273. Thank for allowing me the time to speak with you today. I will be more than happy, and proud to answer any questions about our program and its success. Thank you.