Testimony in Support of LD 503

"An Act To Continue the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program"

Sponsored by Senator Roger Katz

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Senator Volk, Representative Fecteau and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor, Commerce, Research and Economic Development, I am Kris Doody, a Registered Nurse and Chief Executive Officer of Cary Medical Center in Caribou, Maine, and I am here today in strong support of LD 503, "An Act To Continue the Doctors for Maine's Future" Scholarship Program.

Cary Medical Center is an acute care hospital in the northeastern most city in our state and the nation. We have a variety of physicians on our medical staff from primary care to surgical subspecialties. Being a Registered Nurse, I have worked at the hospital for more than 35 years, serving as the CEO since 1999. I can tell you there has never been a time when we were not recruiting physicians. As our population in Aroostook County, 'the oldest county in the oldest state' ages, we are very concerned about the availability of primary care physicians and other physician specialists to meet the growing needs of our patients.

The growing shortage of physicians serving Maine's rural communities demands urgent and creative solutions. National data suggests that, as a nation, we are facing a shortage of up to 90,000 primary care physicians by 2025 and that rural parts of our country will be the hardest hit by this crisis. While 20% of the population lives in rural areas, only 9% of physicians practice here. What is more troubling is that while the shortage of primary care physicians deepens, the rural population of those 55 to 75 years of age will grow by 30% by 2020. The older the population, the more demand for healthcare services due to the increase in chronic illness.

Like many rural communities in Maine, we are facing a growing problem in the recruitment and retention of physicians. That is why we were delighted when we were invited to participate in the Tufts, Maine Medical Center Longitudinal Integrated Clerkship or LIC program for 3rd Year Medical Students. Our medical staff immediately embraced the program and our first two medical students, Tristan Ripley and Jennifer Bergeron set the standard. At a recent reception bidding farewell to Tristan and Jennifer, they had very high praise for their experience with us and they intend to pursue opportunities with our hospital upon completion of their training. We have experienced, first hand, the success of the LIC program. Caleb Swanberg, a native of Caribou and graduate of the Caribou school system, has also participated in the LIC program and upon completion of a Family Practice residency, will join our medical staff in 2018. He has already signed an employment agreement.

I believe one of the reasons for the great success of the LIC program at our hospital is the exclusive, individualized training opportunity it offers, the chance it provides for students to explore life in a rural setting and bringing someone local, like Caleb Swanberg, back home. In the case of Jennifer and Tristan, they both took advantage of their time with us. They worked hard but they also took the time to fish, hunt, snowshoe, cross country ski and explore the region. They could see first-hand that while there

are challenges to providing care in rural Maine, there is ample time to enjoy a quality of life that is truly unique to our environment.

Perhaps an illustration of the clinical experience provided by the LIC comes in a conversation with Jennifer and Tristan on their last day with us. Tristan spoke of a patient in the Emergency Department that presented with abdominal pain. In his assessment of the patient, he suggested a CT Scan to rule out appendicitis. The scan revealed a malignant mass in the patient's colon. Knowing our system and our surgical team, he recommended the patient have an immediate colonoscopy. The procedure was scheduled and the mass was removed within days, possibly saving the life of the patient. Or in the case of Jennifer who became acquainted with an elderly woman during her time in the Oncology rotation. Jennifer described how the woman with stage IV Lung Cancer was treated and ultimately hospitalized. Jen was able to introduce the patient to the hospitalists and assist with her inpatient care. The woman invited Jennifer to share time with her during her final days as she was placed on palliative care. Jennifer described this moving experience that will help guide her in end of life discussions with future patients.

These experiences demonstrate how the LIC program in a rural, community hospital can intimately connect medical students to patients in a way that might not be possible in a large, urban or metropolitan hospital setting. The training opportunity helps the student understand the incredible and life-changing impact they will have on patient's lives. This is the kind of powerful experience that will further inspire medical students to consider rural practice opportunities.

You have and will hear more about the alarming statistics pointing to major physician shortages, especially in rural areas of Maine. This at a time when the population of Maine's rural communities between the ages of 55 and 75 who have a higher need for health care services will increase. LD 503 is a proactive and permanent response by providing medical students from Maine and who demonstrate an interest in practicing here, with additional financial support to combat ever-increasing educational costs and heavy debt burden. While this one program cannot, by itself, solve the entire physician shortage problem, it is a major step in the right direction and is perhaps the most successful approach meeting the demand for rural Maine that I have experienced. I urge you to support this legislation to avert a major crisis in Maine over the next decade and beyond. Thank you.