



Maine Hospital Association

MAINE'S LEADING  
VOICE FOR HEALTHCARE

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## TESTIMONY OF THE MAINE HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

### In Support Of

**LD 2268** – *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission Regarding Foreign-trained Physicians Living in Maine to Establish a Sponsorship Program for International Medical Graduates*

**March 19, 2024**

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee, my name is Sally Weiss, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Hospital Association. MHA represents Maine's 36 private acute care, psychiatric, and rehabilitation hospitals.

I am here today to express our support for LD 2268, an act to establish a sponsorship program for foreign trained physicians. Maine has an aging workforce, which includes physicians. Currently, Maine ranks 1<sup>st</sup> in nation for number of physicians aged 60 or older, with 39.3% (1,746), while at the same time ranking 50<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the proportion of physicians aged 39 or younger, with only 525 physicians, or 11.8%.<sup>1</sup> While Maine has a higher-than-average ratio of physicians to population, those data do not reflect the maldistribution across the state. Most providers live and provide care where 40% of Maine's population lives, which are counties designated as metropolitan, while the remaining 60% live in Maine's most rural 11 counties, where there are fewer providers.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, Maine Rural Health Research Center noted "most counties in Maine face shortages of primary care, mental health, and/or dental health professionals, with 15 Maine counties designated as partial health professional shortage areas in all three domains: primary care, mental health and dental health."<sup>3</sup> While primary care is needed, Maine hospitals are also

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<sup>1</sup> Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), 2021 State Physician Workforce Data Report, January 2022. [https://store.aamc.org/downloadable/download/sample/sample\\_id/506/](https://store.aamc.org/downloadable/download/sample/sample_id/506/)

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graham Center, "Maine: Projecting Primary Care Physician Workforce." <https://www.graham-center.org/content/dam/rgc/documents/maps-data-tools/state-collections/workforce-projections/Maine.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Maine's Rural Health Research Center, "Maine: A Health Focused Landscape Analysis," April 28, 2022. Retrieved from: [https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=population\\_health](https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=population_health)

experiencing significant difficulties hiring those who can provide specialty care, such as OB/Gyn, ENT, Gastroenterology, Orthopedics and Psychiatry.

In October of 2023, MHA surveyed hospitals to assess the current openings for physicians across the state and how these vacancies were impacting access to care. At that time, Maine hospitals reported that they were actively recruiting 385 full time physicians with it taking, on average, 277 days to recruit one physician to practice in Maine.

What do these vacancies mean for patients and Maine communities? Let me share a few direct quotes from Maine hospitals:

- “We have 300+ referrals in a backlog for OB-Gyn care. It’s a 1 year wait for first appointment.”
- “After over three years of searching, we just hired one gastroenterology (GI) physician who is a J1 candidate. The GI practice still needs 3 more doctors.”
- “Our Ears, Nose & Throat (ENT) practice is currently seeking 4 FTEs with only 1.6 FTE remaining. We are currently scheduling new “operative” referrals 9 months out, with a backlog of 167 referrals.”
- “Positions filled with Locums come at an extreme cost and lower quality of care.”
- “We see more people delaying needed care due to access or seeking care in the emergency department.”

Individuals who completed their medical training and practiced medicine outside of the United States but are currently living in Maine because of forced immigration or asylum cannot convert their foreign physician training and experience into practice here in Maine, despite their wanting and capacity to do so. The challenges are numerous, such as difficulty translating various educational and training experiences into U.S. healthcare occupations, licensing exams and certification requirements that don’t mirror their own, lack of clinical experience and exposure to the U.S. health system, immigration status, and cultural and communication barriers, to name a few.

LD 2268 creates a new program that would allow foreign trained physicians living in Maine a pathway to becoming a licensed physician here in Maine. The program, as outlined, would ensure that each foreign trained physician trainee meets all necessary requirements and competencies prior to licensure, while providing an environment where the individual could be supported to gain additional skills related to practicing medicine in the U.S. healthcare system. All candidates who are admitted into the program and successfully complete it, would then be able to practice medicine in Maine with the same privileges as a U.S. trained physician. In addition, increasing the diversity of Maine’s health care workforce will lead to better outcomes particularly for historically underrepresented and underserved communities. Diversity of the population in Maine and the U.S.

is increasing, and we know health outcomes can be improved when a patient's own racial and ethnic identity is reflected in their physician.<sup>4</sup>

As a side note, MHA would like to make a small request to change the title of the bill, as we believe it may be misleading. We would prefer the title to reflect that this program is designed for foreign trained physicians, not international medical graduates. This is clearly outlined in the bill itself but is not congruent with the title. We feel that it should read: *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission Regarding Foreign-trained Physicians Living in Maine to Establish a Sponsorship Program for Foreign Trained Physicians.*

In closing, LD 2268 provides a pathway for foreign trained physicians currently living in Maine to reach their fullest potential while also addressing the ongoing physician shortage across the state. It is for this reason that we support LD 2268.

Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions and make myself available during the work session, should that be helpful.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrews, Ryan, Elliott, Brotherton, Easing the Entry of Qualified International Medical Graduates to U.S. Medical Practice published in Academic Medicine – the Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges