



Testimony of Dena Whitesell, MD
MaineHealth/Tufts University School of Medicine
In Support of LD 581, “An Act to Fund the Doctors for Maine's Future
Scholarship Program”
March 31, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Dena Whitesell, MD, Assistant Dean for Students for the Tufts University School of Medicine and Attending Psychiatrist for MaineHealth, and I am here to testify in strong support of LD 581, “An Act to Fund the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program.”

MaineHealth is an integrated non-profit health care system that provides the full continuum of health care services to the residents of eleven counties in Maine and one in New Hampshire. MaineHealth is also the state’s largest private employer with over 24,000 care team members, but we are facing a workforce crisis that is significantly impacting access to care, and are currently recruiting for 117 physicians.

Though I am “from away” I am very familiar with the barriers that people face seeking healthcare in rural areas. I grew up on my uncle’s farm in upstate New York over an hour’s drive from the nearest hospital. As the first person in my family to attend college, much less attain a graduate degree, I am also acutely aware of the struggles that students face when seeking higher education but facing hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt.

Maine Medical Center (MMC) partnered with the Tufts University School of Medicine (TUSM) in 2008 to start an allopathic medical school program designed to address the shortage of physicians in Maine, particularly in our rural areas, and to give Maine student’s access to high-quality medical education at a tuition cost similar to that of a state-sponsored program. The unique Maine Track program 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.

Maine Medical Center also guarantees that at least 20 Maine students in each class receive scholarships of \$25,000 per year, totaling more than \$2 million each year. The scholarships have been raised through the generosity of private donors, local companies, and, very importantly, the Doctors for Maine’s Future scholarship program, which was created by the 124th Maine Legislature and administered by the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). The Doctors for Maine’s Future scholarship program is a public-private partnership between the State and Tufts – Maine Track and the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine, as each school is required to match the state-funded scholarships, 1:1.

As I shared during your Biennial Budget hearings, the proposed funding for the Doctors for Maine’s Future scholarship program in the FAME section of the Biennial Budget will reduce the

number of scholarships to 3 students at each institution, and eventually 2 students at each institution. It is important to note that the reduction in scholarships also reduces the number of scholarships required to be matched by both schools. This could result in fewer scholarships for Maine-based students. And that is why we are incredibly grateful to Senator Bennett for bringing this bill forward, which provides the absolute minimum funding necessary to continue to the current number of scholarships.

The Doctors for Maine's Future scholarship program has been very successful in achieving its goal of encouraging Maine students to enter medical school, and, it is clear that the Maine Track program is critically important in producing local physicians:

- 74% of Maine Track students who completed their residency in Maine are practicing in Maine. This is exceptionally high in comparison to data from the Association of American Medical Colleges', which found that a 58.6% of the individuals who completed residency training from 2014 to 2023 are practicing in the state where they did their residency training.
- Nationally, the number of individuals applying to medical school declined by over 7% last year, but Maine saw an increase of 8% from the year prior.
- The Maine Track Class of 2025 includes 42 students—20 of these students grew up in Maine.
- To date, 429 physicians over 11 classes have graduated from the Maine Track Program. 278 were from Maine.
- The program is accessible. We are very proud to offer a Maine Track Early Assurance Program for sophomores at Bates College, Bowdoin College, Colby College, and all University of Maine campuses. Additionally, The MMC-TUSM acceptance rate last year for Mainers into the Maine Track was 47%. For those from away, our acceptance rate was only 17%. This compares very favorably to TUSM's overall acceptance rate of approximately 4% and the average national acceptance rate of approximately 5.5%.
- The Maine Track program has come full circle. Graduates are now faculty teaching current students. Caleb Swanberg, MD, class of 2015, who has spoken to you in the past, precepts students in Family Medicine when they rotate in Caribou for nine months. The site director for our rural site in Norway is a former graduate. Another graduate from the class of 2023 is a second year resident in the newly formed Rural Track of the Psychiatry Residency program at Maine Medical Center. There are countless other examples.

One significant challenge we face in retaining our medical school graduates, however, is that states' residency slots have been limited by funding to support graduate medical education from the Federal government. MaineHealth has been able to increase the number of resident and fellowship positions through our own resources, recognizing this as a solution to our physician workforce needs. But more needs to be done to ensure that Maine-trained students have access to a residency placements in Maine. Recent reports show that Maine is the 8th best state at retaining

physicians who complete their residency in Maine. We can further enhance the effectiveness of the Doctors for Maine's Future scholarship program if we can increase the number of residency slots in Maine.

As the Legislature seeks to increase access to health care, including behavioral health care, it is critical that investments be made in increasing the pipeline of future health care workers, like the Doctors for Maine's Future scholarship program.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.