



**Testimony of Dr. Kneka Smith, MaineHealth
In Strong Support of LD 1311, “An Act to Expand Maine's Health Care Workforce
by Improving Educational Opportunities,” As Amended
Friday, April 4, 2025**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Dr. Kneka Smith, Vice President of Academic Affairs at MaineHealth, and I am here to testify in strong support of LD 1311, “An Act to Expand Maine's Health Care Workforce by Improving Educational Opportunities,” as amended.

MaineHealth is an integrated non-profit hospital 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. We are currently recruiting for nearly 2,500 positions, including 117 physicians and over 540 nurses.

While we are in strong support of each component of this legislation, my testimony today focuses on three specific sections of the bill that are critically important to addressing our workforce needs.

Expanding rural residency positions and rotations for medical students in the State

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. Maine Medical Center currently trains 333 residents and fellows, and 14 non-ACGME accredited trainees and is approved for a total of 407 GME trainees when all approved program expansions are finalized in 2031. But more needs to be done to ensure that Maine-trained students have access to residency placements in Maine.

It is for that reason that we strongly support the legislation before you today, which provides funding to expand the number of rural residency placements. In addition to rural residency placements, LD 1311 also provides funding to continue the work of the Maine Rural GME Education (MERGE) Collaborative, which is a collaboration between the four Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Sponsoring Institutions (teaching hospitals) in Maine. The MERGE Collaborative is working to develop new rural training experiences across the state, including in Farmington and Blue Hill.

This is important because data from the Association of American Medical Colleges’ 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. Recent reports show that Maine is the 8th best state at retaining physicians who complete their residency in Maine. In fact, 74% of Maine Medical Center’s Maine Track students who completed their residency in Maine are practicing in Maine. The data speaks for itself. If we build it, they will stay.

Funding for the Building-ME Network

LD 1311 also continues funding for the Building-ME Network, which is creating a statewide system to streamline clinical placements of trainees and preceptors in rural and underserved communities through an electronic matching platform. Unfortunately, this weekend we received a stop work order from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services due to the Trump Administration's termination of our federal grant.

The Building-ME Network has been instrumental in launching a Medical Assistant Program at MaineHealth Lincoln Hospital and Pen Bay Medical Center, as well as a CNA program at Mount Desert Island Hospital. Additionally, 1,020 new trainees were placed in 28 health care disciplines across the state, which has resulted in 205 of the trainees being hired in rural communities. We anticipate additional trainees to be hired who are still completing their training. Additionally, the Building-ME Network efforts have supported 44 new preceptorship programs in 18 different disciplines, 118 clinical educators (preceptors) in taking healthcare students for clinical rotations in rural communities for the very first time, and preceptor development for 144 new and experienced preceptors across the state.

The Building-ME Network is statewide collaborative inclusive of all academic institutions in the state who are educating health care students, including the University of Maine System, the Maine Community College System, adult education, and private universities. Other members of in the Building-ME Network include Northern Light Health, the Maine Primary Care Association, the Maine Hospital Association and individual hospitals and clinics in rural communities from Cary Medical Center to Mount Desert Island Hospital, to clinical sites in rural western and coastal Maine. LD 1311 provides a lifeline for that work focused on both jobs and healthcare in rural Maine communities to continue.

Support for Allied Health Professionals

To ensure patients have access to broad health care resources including diagnostic and treatment options, in addition to addressing the physician and nursing shortage, we must address the critical shortage of allied health professionals. Maine lacks some training programs for these types of positions, such MRI Technologists, which is directly impacting the pipeline of these essential health care workers. Additionally, our educational partners site the lack of necessary student volume in some areas to support these programs in Maine – an example being respiratory therapy. LD 1311 provides funding to develop innovative solutions to create alternative education and training programs, as well as providing support for Earn as You Learn programs.

The health care system in Maine is becoming exceedingly fragile, which is evidenced by the recent hospital and service closures, as well as the hundreds of patients stuck in our hospitals every day waiting for the next appropriate level of care. The workforce crisis is contributing to the unraveling of our system of care, and we urge the Legislature to support several critical workforce related bills this Session, including LD 1311, to help address our state's growing workforce needs.

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

An Act to Expand Maine's Health Care Workforce by Expanding Educational Opportunities

Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:

Sec. 1. 22 MRSA c. 279 is enacted to read:

CHAPTER 279

MAINE HEALTH CARE EDUCATION TRAINING AND MEDICAL RESIDENCY FUND

§1700-H. Maine Health Care Education Training and Medical Residency Fund

1. Fund established. The Maine Health Care Education Training and Medical Residency Fund, referred to in this chapter as "the fund," is established within the department as a dedicated, nonlapsing account to support health care in rural and underserved communities, and physician workforce development. The fund is authorized to receive revenue from public and private sources.

2. Fund sources and administration. The fund consists of amounts appropriated or allocated by the State. The department may apply for federal and private grant funding to cover the costs of the program under this section. Money received by the department on behalf of the fund must be used for the purposes of this chapter. The fund must be maintained and administered by the department. Any unexpended balance in the fund carries forward for continued use under this chapter, except for federal funds that must be expended according to guidelines issued by the Federal Government governing the use of those funds.

3. Use of fund. The department shall make distributions from the fund to programs based in the State to support the following purposes:

A. Expanding rural primary care clinical rotations for 3rd-year medical students to support long-term professional practice in the rural parts of the State;

B. Expanding rural primary care clinical rotations for 4th-year medical students to support long-term professional practice in the rural parts of the State;

C. Expanding rural residency positions and rotations in the State;

D. Establishing and expanding clinical preceptorships in rural and underserved communities, including the cost of preceptor recruiting, training, and compensation for preceptor time, and travel and housing costs for learners in rural rotations;

E. Supporting programs that seek to develop local health care education leaders for the purpose of expanding clinical rotations, residencies, and preceptorships;

F. Competitive grants for innovative solutions, technological advancements, and earn as you learn programs to support and expand clinical education, training, and placements for clinical healthcare roles. The department shall consult with experts in the field of health care in designing the grant program; and

G. Supporting electronic platforms used to make clinical placements.

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4. Definitions.

As used in this subsection, "rural" means areas in the State that are designated as health professional shortage areas or medically underserved areas or that contain a medically underserved population as defined by the federal Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration.

"Earn as you learn program" means a program wherein a student or learner is employed and is paid for learning specific skills and expertise for a particular role.

4. Rules. The department may adopt rules to implement this section. Rules adopted pursuant to this subsection are routine technical rules as defined in Title 5, chapter 375, subchapter 2-A.

Sec. 2. Appropriations and allocations. The following appropriations and allocations are made.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, DEPARTMENT OF

Maine Health Care Education Training and Medical Residency Fund N433

Initiative: Provides ongoing funding to the Maine Health Care Education Training and Medical Residency Fund.

GENERAL FUND	2025-26	2026-27
All Other	\$5,000,000	\$5,000,000
GENERAL FUND TOTAL	\$5,000,000	\$5,000,000

**HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,
DEPARTMENT OF
DEPARTMENT TOTALS**

	2025-26	2026-27
GENERAL FUND	\$5,000,000	\$5,000,000
DEPARTMENT TOTAL - ALL FUNDS	\$5,000,000	\$5,000,000