

Testimony in Support of LD 440
An Act To Continue the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program
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Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business

Senator Herbig, Representative Daughtry, 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 440 "An Act To Continue the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program."

I grew up in a small town in rural Iowa and had the opportunity to attend public, state sponsored undergraduate and medical colleges. Fortunately, my student debt was much less than what students need to borrow today, and I was able to pay off my student debt relatively soon after graduation. When I moved to Maine in 1999, my credit history was well-established and helped by the positive student debt repayment history.

Since 2008, I have had the privilege to play a leadership role in the Maine Track, 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, as co-chair of our Maine Admissions committee, and throughout their years as a student. Several of these incredibly talented, dedicated individuals are in this room today – you will hear from a few shortly and from many more who wrote statements that I have to provide for you today.

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 AAMC, the average medical school student in the US graduates with over \$200,000 in 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 found a unique program designed to serve Maine students close to home. 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 initially intended to cover about 50% of their tuition – or the equivalent of 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 extremely 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 UNECOM and *Maine Track*, or a total of \$100,000 over the course of completing a four-year medical school program. This represents a significant portion of tuition costs for 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 16 students (4 per medical student year) qualify for state-funded scholarships at any one time, Maine Medical Center raises and matches private funds for another 16 students for 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 two Maine Track students who will graduate next month, and I have more letters of support from several alumni and current medical students. From the six classes of *Maine Track* alumni to date, several are now practicing (while others complete further training). This unique program, with a foundation of rural health care and affordable medical education, has produced promising results.

- **43% of the practicing graduates who completed training and have not military commitment, practice in Maine.** This is comparable with the most successful rural focused medical education in the country.
- We have seen a 40% increase in Maine applicants since the program was founded (6th fastest growth rate in the US),
- 65% of our students call Maine "home",
- 27% of our graduates complete a residency in Maine (this would be higher if we were able to secure federal support to expand the number of residency spots), and
- **More than 50% of graduates pursue a primary care specialty (Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, and Pediatrics).**
- **Debt burden is reduced significantly! As of 2018:**
 - **Average debt of TUSM students, including joint degree students = \$222,682**
 - **Average debt of Maine Track students = \$197,385**
 - **Average debt of students who received DfMF or MMC-DfMF matching scholarship = \$162,923.**

You have before you a stack of statements from Maine Track alumni and current students who provide compelling stories. One is from a DFMF scholar, who graduated with the first Maine

Track class, Dr. Marya Spurling. Dr. Spurling grew up on Little Cranberry Island in a family with a long line of local lobsterman. She attended Mount Desert Island High School and after completing the *Maine Track* program chose a family practice residency in Anchorage, Alaska. She now practices primary care in Skowhegan and teaches Maine Track medical students. She couldn't make it today due to patient care responsibilities, but her testimony is included with mine in the packet before you. In her statement, Dr. Spurling describes how access to the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship provided funding for half of her medical school tuition, and deemed it a critical program for aspiring young doctors from Maine. She still graduated from medical school with a student debt burden nearing \$160,000 which would have been nearly doubled without access to the program.

Two student representatives from the current 4th year class of 2019, Adriana Eurich (Millinocket) and Daniel Hussey (Waterville), will follow me to provide comments about their journeys, including their respective backgrounds and experiences from the *Maine Track* program as Doctors for Maine's Future scholars.

The outcomes we are seeing a result 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 440. 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.