

February 24, 2021

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jennifer Gunderman and I am Director of the Maine Area Health Education Center, otherwise known as the acronym AHEC. One of the budget items included in LD221 FAME budget supports the AHEC program. I want to thank you for the continued support and tell you a little about work that we do and the impact it has on Maine.

In Maine, the AHEC program office/mother ship lives at UNE. The three regional AHEC Centers include Northern Center at Northern Maine Community College; Western Center at Franklin Healthcare; and Eastern Center at Northern Light. Maine AHEC network is funded by federal government HRSA, FAME, and University of New England. The mission of AHEC is to enhance the quality of and access to health care among underserved populations through experience based learning, and interprofessional and multidisciplinary partnerships. We do this by:

- providing rural, interprofessional, community-based clinical training experiences for health professions students;
- encouraging Maine youth and mid-career professionals to pursue health careers
- supporting practicing health professionals with continuing education and learning opportunities
- promoting population and public health approaches to addressing current and emerging health issues

So what does work look like on the ground?

- Programs at Deering and Lewiston high schools for students from refugee and immigrant families that voice an interest in a future health profession career. They are supported with hands on health profession related activities, tutoring, mentoring, and job shadowing.
- Health professions summer camp for high school students across the state
- Thousands of current health care professionals receiving continuing education on opioid use disorder, cultural awareness, integration of behavioral health, telehealth, and COVID-19.
- Health profession students being placed in rural communities for clinical rotations and involved in local community based activities
- A 2 year nationally recognized Scholar Program that excites and prepares health profession students to work in rural and underserved communities.
- Rural health immersion where health profession students spend 3-5 days in rural areas of Maine observing and experiencing the resiliency of rural communities and the challenges they face in improving and maintaining health. Also includes community based activities such as providing fluoride varnish for all head start students in Waldo County, participating in community training on Narcan, enjoying community dinners with local leaders, educating elementary school students on Lyme Disease prevention, fixing up a food pantry, conducting foot checks at senior lunches. Fun to have a student from Miami see a moose in Ashland for the first time.

Over the past few months, the AHEC program office and the three regional centers have been organizing staffing of health profession students at COVID-19 vaccine clinics throughout Maine. At UNE alone, we have registered and trained over 500 faculty, staff, and students to assist in various roles at mass COVID-19 vaccine clinics. As an added benefit, working at COVID-19 vaccine clinics has allowed some clinical students to meet their clinical hour requirements to graduate- something that might not have been possible due to COVID-19 restrictions and inability to complete clinical training.

Personally, AHEC has impacted my own backyard. When my oldest daughter graduated from high school she left Maine for college and she told me that she may possibly never come back. But she returned. Because of the reach of AHEC programming, my daughter is months away from completing nursing school and recently took a job at a Maine hospital ED (not in Portland or Bangor). She is excited to give back to state that given her so much. AHEC is filled with many students and health professionals like my daughter. Thank you for continuing to support out work.

Sincerely,

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