



January 10, 2024

Senator Regina Birdsell, Chair
Senate Health and Human Services Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 101
33 N. State Street
Concord, NH 03301

RE: [SB 403](#) relative to health care workforce investments

Dear Chairwoman Birdsell and Members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Kristina Fjeld-Sparks and I am the Director of the NH Area Health Education Center (AHEC), a program that began in New Hampshire in 1997 through limited funding from the Bureau of Healthcare Workforce at the Health Resources Services Administration. NH AHEC's mission is to improve access to care, particularly in rural and underserved areas, by enhancing the health and public health workforce in the state. The NH AHEC network includes the Northern NH AHEC, Southern AHEC, and the main office at Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice. We aim to achieve a high-quality, cost-effective health care system by joining the intellectual resources of academic institutions with the needs of populations in rural and underserved communities.

The NH AHEC network is a part of a critical pipeline that fuels the recruitment, training, distribution, and retention of a national health workforce. At a time where the Association of American Medical Colleges projects our nation will have a shortage of nearly 120,000 physicians by 2030, and the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that we will have less than 10% of the nursing workforce needed by 2031, the AHEC stands as a central access point in meeting health workforce demand. In recognizing this, the AHEC program engages in pre-pipeline, pipeline, and post-pipeline activities that guide individuals through health careers pathways and beyond, with a special emphasis on rural and underserved areas.

Since creation the NH AHEC, we have implemented programs based on qualitative research of health care workforce outcomes. For example: growing up in a rural area is reported to be the strongest predictor of future practice in rural area¹; Rural training is important to future recruitment¹, with a focus on increased exposure resulting in increased likelihood of provider selecting a rural area of practice, and more exposure leads to greater success.

The NH AHEC's strategy is to expose students to health professions careers early and provide a structured opportunity to explore their ideas through afterschool programs in elementary and middle school, and longitudinal and residential programs in high school.

¹ MacQueen IT, Maggard-Gibbons M, Capra G, Raaen L, Ulloa JG, Shekelle PG, Miake-Lye I, Beroes JM, Hempel

S. Recruiting Rural Healthcare Providers Today: a Systematic Review of Training Program Success and Determinants of Geographic Choices. J Gen Intern Med. 2018 Feb;33(2):191-199. doi: 10.1007/s11606-017-4210-z. Epub 2017 Nov 27.

With that in mind, state resources will allow the NH AHECs to craft a surge of activities and “prime the pump” for workforce pipeline activities designed to meet the needs of New Hampshire. For example:

- **Elementary and Middle School STEM-Health Career Summer Camps:** Our programs for elementary and middle school students include hands-on workshops and field trips; others will consist of discussion groups around various professions.
- **Middle School Health Career Presentations:** We work with students and teachers to foster interest in health careers by providing informative health career presentations and hands-on experiences delivered in various New Hampshire schools. Presentations vary from less than one-hour to a large-scale, hands-on rotation.
- **High School Summer Health Career Camps:** Summer health career day camp experiences foster health and behavioral health careers for 8th and 9th grade students.
- **High School After School Programs:** These programs provide youth engagement in an enhanced science curriculum, career exploration, and mentoring experience as an after-school activity.
- **Residential High School Program: Health Careers Institute at Dartmouth (HCID):** This is a week-long residential program for 10th, 11th, and 12th graders to learn about health careers while spending the week living in the Dartmouth College dorms and exploring life on a college campus.
- **New Hampshire AHEC Health Equity Scholars (MD and PA students):** State resources will allow us to expand the immersion experience for MD and PA student scholars to include extended service-learning opportunities in rural and underserved areas.

Although our programs are successful, they are limited in scope and scale due to funding limitations. Currently, New Hampshire is one of the only states that does not fund its AHEC programs. We continually apply for federal grants; however, these funds are often earmarked for activities that may not allow us to develop or expand pipeline programs, and/or are focused on needs of the nation, but not the needs of New Hampshire.

The NH AHEC Network has the infrastructure and experience to expand our tried-and-true program offerings. State funding to support the AHEC pipeline programming will enable us to expand pipeline programs for Granite Staters to address our current and projected workforce shortage.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with my enthusiastic support for this proposed legislation, and I appreciate your consideration of this matter. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions at kristina.e.fjeld-sparks@dartmouth.edu.

Sincerely,

Kristina Fjeld-Sparks, MPH,
Director/PI, New Hampshire Area Health Education Center
Sr. Research Scientist, The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice