

MERGE News



Newsletter Highlights

[Elective Rotation Spotlight: HealthReach Community Health Centers](#)

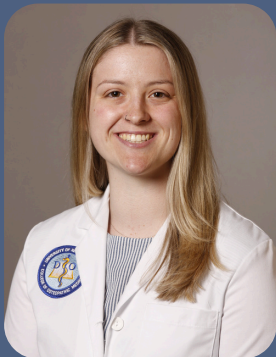
[Rural Recreation for Residents](#)

[Maine Rural Healthcare Education Grand Rounds](#)

[A Message from Dr. Kalli Varaklis - MERGE Collaborative Principal Investigator](#)

MERGE SUMMER INTERNS ADVOCATE FOR NEW HEALTHCARE POLICIES TO SUPPORT RURAL MAINE

For the second year, the MERGE Collaborative has supported four medical students in a summer research internship grounded in Rural Maine. Each intern worked with a mentor and selected a rural community to explore healthcare disparities and patient needs. The goal was for each intern to produce a policy brief addressing local rural healthcare needs and an academic poster to share their work at the MERGE Conference 2025. This year, all four selected interns were raised in rural Maine and returned to their respective homes to conduct research. This internship gave the opportunity for these future physicians to immerse more fully into their rural communities.



MERGE Interns 2024, from the top left, clockwise: Olivia Lopes, Alexa Bigelow, Madison Jandreau, and Maguire Anuszewski.

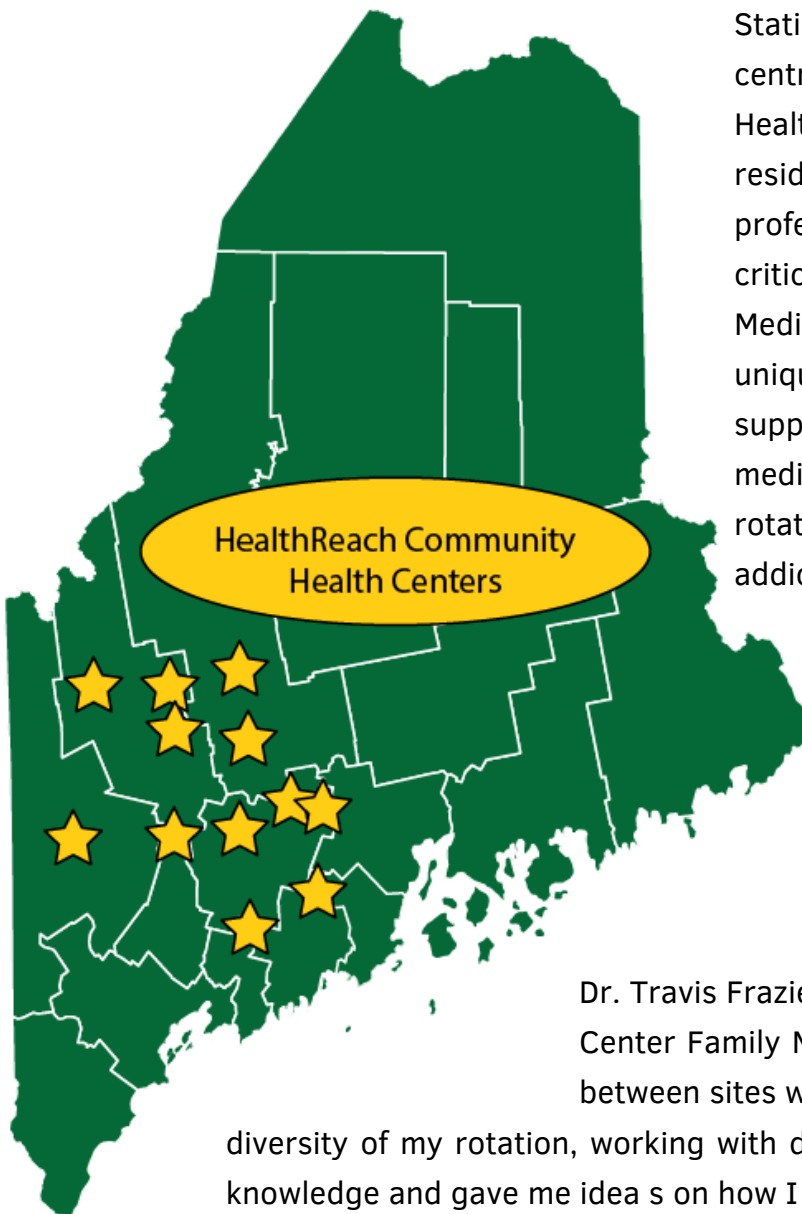
Alexa Bigelow, a second-year student at the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine and AHEC Scholar, selected the topic of maternal health across the state and access to care due to birthing unit closures. “Maternal access is an issue across the entire country, but Maine has a unique landscape and size that makes it more vulnerable than most states to birthing unit closures,” said Ms. Bigelow. In her policy brief, Ms. Bigelow noted the low rates offered in Maine’s loan repayment programs. Programs in Maine are less than half of what is offered in New Hampshire or Vermont.

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MERGE Rotation Specialties

- Family Medicine
- Internal Medicine
- Emergency Medicine
- Psychiatry
- Addiction Medicine
- Carceral Medicine
- Geriatrics/Hospice
- OB/GYN
- Pediatrics
- Cardiology
- General Surgery
- Vascular Surgery
- Anesthesiology

SPOTLIGHT: HEALTHREACH COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS



Stationed like outposts across the vast reaches of central and western Maine, HealthReach Community Health Centers provide many services to Maine's rural residents in several different counties. Medical professionals work at 12 unique clinics to provide critical primary care services. Under the leadership of Medical Director Dr. Amy Madden, MERGE offers three unique rural rotations for resident physicians to support Maine's patient population in addiction medicine, geriatrics, or adolescent health. Each rotation is unique in its content and delivery. The addiction medicine rotation travels from site to site to

provide services such as assessing the needs of people seeking assistance for managing substance use disorder, providing treatment, and connecting people with recovery support. The adolescent health rotation is grounded at one site, the Bulldog Health Center located at Lawrence High School in Fairfield, ME.

Dr. Travis Frazier, a recent graduate of the Central Maine Medical Center Family Medicine Residency, had the opportunity to travel between sites with the addiction medicine rotation. "I liked the diversity of my rotation, working with different providers at different sites. It helped my knowledge and gave me ideas on how I can improve treatment in my own practice."

Maine is one of the most rural states in the nation. Access to care is a critical issue for all of Maine's rural counties and having small clinics around the state can help make services accessible. "HealthReach's mission is to provide high-quality, affordable, patient-centered healthcare to medically underserved areas in our region of Maine. We believe that increasing resident physicians' exposure to the care delivered by dedicated and experienced practitioners will reinforce how rewarding it is to practice in a rural area. It's valuable for them to see how much of an impact they can have on improving healthcare in rural communities," says Dr. Madden.

Those interested in this rotation can reach out to MERGE Program Manager David McLellan at david.mclellan@mainehealth.org



A skier hits the slopes at Sunday River in Newry, ME.

RURAL RECREATION FOR RESIDENTS

Thank you to all of our partners across the state that have made complimentary recreation and leisure opportunities available to MERGE residents. We are happy to have our continued partnerships with the State Parks of Maine and Boyne Resorts, the parent company of Sugarloaf, Sunday River, and Pleasant Mountain Ski Resorts.

MERGE TO PRESENT AT THE SOCIETY OF TEACHERS OF FAMILY MEDICINE

Congratulations to Dr. Annie Derthick of Central Maine Medical Center for being asked to present on the MERGE Collaborative internship program at the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine Conference on Medical Student Education in January 2025. Dr. Derthick serves as a rural GME director for the MERGE Collaborative and is the chair of the MERGE Collaborative Executive Council. In 2023, Dr. Derthick devised the MERGE internship program to focus on the community health needs assessments (CHNAs) for each rural county in Maine. She envisioned the existing program where medical students live in a rural community to interview providers, map out resources, and create a policy brief to support local leaders in population health.

Dr. Derthick will present “A community-engaged internship for students from rural communities” in San Antonio, TX. Her co-author of the paper is Dr. Kalli Varaklis, Principal Investigator for the MERGE Collaborative. The conference will take place from January 30th – February 2nd. Registration opens in early November 2024. For more information, visit <https://www.stfm.org/mse>.

UPCOMING MAINE RURAL HEALTHCARE EDUCATION GRAND ROUNDS

- **September 13th**, 12:00 PM, “Wellness and Mindfulness to Increase Retention and Reduce Burnout,” presented by Kelley Strout, PhD, RN from the University of Maine School of Nursing
- **October 11th**, 12:00 PM, “Supporting Healthcare Learners with Disabilities,” presented by Bethany Picker, MD from Central Maine Medical Center

All presentations are virtual and accessible from http://bit.ly/Maine_Rural_Healthcare_Education

More information about our Grand Rounds speakers can be found on our website at: <https://mergecollaborative.org/maine-rural-healthcare-education-grand-rounds/>



Kelley Strout (left) and Dr. Bethany Picker (right) will present the next two grand rounds.

MERGE SUMMER INTERNS - CONTINUED

Another research project focused on substance use disorders (SUD) in Somerset County. Olivia Lopes, a second-year medical student at the Tufts School of Medicine – Maine Track, was interested in this topic because of her experience in the army. “I had been on active duty and had many soldiers under my command who were dealing with substance use disorders. It had an impact on me and I think it will play into my practice as a physician in the future,” said Ms. Lopes. The rates of SUD in Somerset County are more than twice that of the state-wide average. Ms. Lopes’ research took her from Skowhegan to Jackman to work with community organizations and physicians to better understand the challenges unique to this rural area.

All four policy briefs written by the MERGE interns and their mentors can be found on the MERGE Collaborative website. These policy briefs will be shared with local legislators and other community leaders to bring awareness to the most pressing issues facing Maine’s rural patient population.

2024 MERGE INTERNSHIP PROJECTS

Maguire Anuszewski

Brown University

Lifestyle & Diet Health in
Winthrop, ME

Alexa Bigelow

University of New England

Maternal Health in Rural Maine
Counties: Evaluating Access to
Care Due to Birthing Unit Closures

Madison Jandreau

Tufts University - Maine Track

Transportation as a Social Driver
of Health in Aroostook County

Olivia Lopes

Tufts University - Maine Track

Substance Use Disorder in
Somerset County, ME



A Message from Kalli Varaklis, MD, MEd MERGE Collaborative Principal Investigator

This July, the four Sponsoring Institutions in Maine welcomed ~150 new interns, residents and fellows who are starting or continuing their graduate medical education training in Maine. Although most of their training will take place at EMMC, CMMC, Maine General and Maine Medical Center-Portland, ‘our’ Maine-based residents and fellows are actually trained in ~ 50 different sites across

the state (not including elective sites!). The diversity of training sites, including community hospitals, outpatient surgical centers, urban clinics, rural settings, critical care hospitals, tertiary-referral centers, the VA at Togus and Portland and many more, is necessary to train graduates to be able to practice in the myriad of diverse practice settings in an ever-complex care delivery environment. As ~45-50% of all Maine-based GME graduates typically stay in the state of Maine, this diversity of training is even more critical as we train the next generation of Maine physicians to meet the needs of ALL Maine patients.