



JANUARY 2025

# MERGE News

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## YEAR TWO, IN REVIEW

When the MERGE Collaborative was first proposed in 2022, it received the backing of a two-year grant from the Department of Health and Human Services that hoped to establish four new rural rotations for graduate medical education by the end of 2024. As we begin 2025, the MERGE Collaborative is happy to report 35 rural rotation sites around the state of Maine and operational funding to continue our work through September 2027. In two short years, MERGE has developed a wide network of clinical learning sites and medical professionals around the state who are passionate about supporting the next generation of rural physicians.

Additionally, MERGE leads programs that support the wider rural healthcare education network. MERGE is supporting medical educators and leaders through the Rural Education Leaders Academy (RELA). The MERGE summer internship program helps build a pipeline to our rural training programs and practice opportunities and engages medical students in developing policy briefs about rural-relevant population health issues. As this wide network converges, it is with the shared vision of supporting Maine's rural population through improved workforce development outcomes and more training that supports the unique needs of rural patients.

## 2024 By the Numbers

- 35** Rural elective sites established
- 40** Completed MERGE rural elective rotations
- 11** Residents signed up for MERGE in 2025 so far
- 12** Grand Rounds presentations
- 9** Healthcare professionals engaged in rural education leadership training
- 7** Research projects for rural Maine completed

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To see all rural elective offerings, visit our website [here](#)

## CMMC GRADUATE TAKES POSITION IN SKOWHEGAN, ME

When Dr. Jaclyn Israel arrived in Maine, she already had a love for the great outdoors. Before going to medical school in Detroit, she had spent time in Colorado and knew she was happiest when she could pursue medicine and be close to her hobbies, such as hiking and skiing. As such, Maine was her first choice and the rural track at Central Maine Medical Center Family Medicine Residency was a great fit for her training.



Dr. Jaclyn Israel (above) recently graduated from the CMMC Family Medicine Residency, participated in MERGE, and now works for Redington-Fairview General Hospital in Skowhegan, ME

In Dr. Israel's third year of residency, she had to complete a gynecology rotation to meet her graduation requirements. She also wanted more OB experience in a rural setting. The MERGE Collaborative gave her the perfect opportunity to bring her program requirements together with her professional interests. She selected the Ob/Gyn MERGE rotation at MaineHealth Stephens Hospital in Norway, ME, led by rotation director Dr. Jeannette Andrews. Said Dr. Israel, "Working with Dr. Andrews was a great experience. The high-risk panel and wide case variety gave me insight to the specialist approach in a rural setting and the volume of obstetric cases helped me meet my delivery goals."

After Dr. Israel completed her residency in June 2024, she took a position as a family medicine physician with Redington-Fairview General Hospital in Skowhegan, ME. Now, she is close to the ski mountains that she loves and has a thriving practice that includes obstetric and pediatric patients. When she delivered her first patient in Skowhegan, she sent Dr. Andrews pictures. And when Dr. Andrews had a patient move to the Skowhegan area, she referred the patient to Dr. Israel.

This professional network, developed between rural clinician and a GME learner is the perfect example of what the MERGE Collaborative was designed to accomplish.

### MERGE CONFERENCE 2025

**Date:** November 14th, 2025

**Location:** MaineGeneral Medical Center, Augusta, ME

**Theme:** Delivering Rural Interprofessional Medical Education



MaineGeneral Medical Center will host the 2025 MERGE Conference

## MERGE PARTNERS WITH CIPHR TO ENGAGE RURAL COMMUNITIES

In September of 2024, the MERGE Collaborative received \$667,330 from HRSA to develop a new Rural Obstetric Training Intensive across Maine and northern New Hampshire. This grant put forward the goal of developing a curriculum that supports Ob/gyn and Family Medicine residents who are interested in practicing obstetrics in a rural setting. Six rural sites have come together to form the Rural Obstetric Education Committee that will oversee the development and implementation of the new elective curriculum.



The Center for Interdisciplinary Population and Health Research (CIPHR) is part of the MaineHealth Institute for Research in Portland, ME

An important first step is listening to our rural patient communities in order to build a curriculum and learning experience that best prepares the next generation of obstetric practicing physicians to support rural patients. In order to receive quality feedback, MERGE has partnered with the MaineHealth Center for Interdisciplinary Population and Health Research (CIPHR). The CIPHR Community Engagement and Outreach (CEO) team offers expertise in developing “community engagement studios.” These studios are similar to patient focus groups, but positions the patients not as human subjects rather as expert consultants based on their experience. With leadership from CEO navigators, CIPHR will bring together groups of patients who have received obstetric care in the past five years to bring their expert advice to the curriculum development process. Said one CEO navigator, Emma DayBranch MPH, “Centering lived experience expertise in efforts to improve health is incredibly important as it increases the feasibility, effectiveness, relevance, equity and translation. We forward an approach that embodies ‘nothing about us without us’. These studio structures help to bring voices and perspectives that are sometimes hard to reach to the table during the research/project design and implementation process.” The goal is to complete all patient engagement studios by summer 2025.

Dr. Kalli Varaklis, Principal Investigator for the MERGE Collaborative and the Rural Obstetric Training Intensive, said, “We are so grateful to have the expertise of CIPHR available to this important initiative. We look forward to integrating patient feedback to the fabric of this novel training experience.”

## UPCOMING GRAND ROUNDS PRESENTATIONS

### January 10th

“AI Supported Precision Medical Education”



Presented by Dr. Kalli Varaklis, DIO Maine Medical Center and PI for the MERGE Collaborative

### February 14th

“Stay Calm, Teach On: Managing Stress While Precepting”



Presented by Frank Bailey, Ed.D, Medical Educator for Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center

### March 14th

“Bias in Competency-Based Education”



Presented by Dr. Annie Derthick, Associate Program Director for the Central Maine Medical Center Family Medicine Residency

**2025 sessions will be on the 2nd Friday of most months from 12:00-12:45 PM**

**<https://mergecollaborative.org/maine-rural-healthcare-education-grand-rounds/>**



Open to the public at this link

**[http://bit.ly/Maine\\_Rural\\_Healthcare\\_Education](http://bit.ly/Maine_Rural_Healthcare_Education)**

## A “GRAND” FIRST YEAR FOR THE MAINE RURAL HEALTHCARE EDUCATION GRAND ROUNDS

The Maine Rural Healthcare Education Grand Rounds were launched in January 2024 with the vision of supporting rural educators with relevant learning topics for their unique demographics. The MERGE Collaborative partnered with the Building Maine Network to bring speakers from across the state and some from around the country. 176 participants joined over 12 unique sessions. Topics ranged from supporting unique learners, improving productivity, and avoiding bias in different scenarios. All presentations have been archived on the MERGE website and have been incorporated as teaching tools for various groups.

Presentations will continue in 2025. The year will include 9 presentations. The months of July and August will be off for the summer and the November session will align with the 2025 MERGE Conference.

## RELA LAUNCHES NEW COHORT IN 2025

The Rural Education Leaders Academy (RELA) was established in July 2023 to bring together the next generation of clinical education leaders throughout rural Maine. The first cohort of leaders completed the course in December 2024 and the second cohort will begin their journey in January 2025. The new learners represent a diverse group of clinicians from across the state. Scholarly and quality-improvement projects developed by all RELA scholars will be presented as part of the 2025 MERGE Conference on November 14th, 2025.

### RELA PARTICIPANTS 2025

Barbara Jean Bragdon, MSN, Nursing Education, Mount Desert Island Hospital  
 Jodi Conrad, DO, Emergency Medicine, MaineHealth - Franklin Hospital  
 Katherine Gassman, DO, Family Medicine, Mount Desert Island Hospital  
 Lana Hoertz, MSPAS, Emergency Medicine, Waldo County General Hospital  
 Cavanaugh Kelly, PhD, Occupational Therapy, Husson University  
 Laura Onderko, MD, Cardiology, Maine Medical Partners - Lewiston  
 Avery Osella, MD, Geriatrics, MaineHealth-Franklin Hospital  
 Mike Schmitz, DO, Emergency Medicine, Houlton Regional Hospital  
 Julian Weinstein, DO, Family Medicine, Mount Desert Island Hospital

## 2025 MERGE SUMMER INTERNSHIP NOW OPEN FOR APPLICATIONS

MERGE's summer research internship is now open for applications. This exciting program gives medical students the opportunity to work closely with graduate medical education leaders to better understand Maine's rural healthcare needs. Interns live and work in one of Maine's rural communities during the summer months and researches the most pressing healthcare needs for that region. The work culminates in a scholarly poster and policy brief with recommended solutions for community leaders. **The application window will close at 5:00 PM on February 14th, 2025.**

Interested students may download the application at:  
<https://mergecollaborative.org/summer-internships/>



2024 Intern Olivia Lopes (right) joins paramedic Schyler Carpenter (left) at the Jackman Community Health Center as part of her research