

From: [David Notter](#)
To: [Senate Finance Committee](#)
Subject: Support Alaska WWAMI medical education program
Date: Tuesday, March 24, 2015 1:40:08 PM

Dear Committee Finance,

I'm writing these first two paragraphs from my own experience, to support allowing the WWAMI program's continued funding by the Alaska State legislature. These remarks comprise my own personal testimony; following that is a brief non-personal informational note from ASHNHA, with which I have complete agreement, but which could have, in some respects, less impact for you than that of my own personal experience. My story is as follows: I graduated from the University of Washington School of Medicine in 1971 and practiced cancer medicine in Wenatchee WA until my retirement in 2010. Since that time, I have on occasion covered for members of a medical oncology group in Anchorage when staffing needs caused them to ask me to help out temporarily. During my one-third century of medical practice in Wenatchee, I had occasion intermittently to interact with WWAMI students on their rotations, and several of my internal medicine colleagues had far more extensive WWAMI medical student interactions during these decades than I. The cumulative impressions of those experiences were highly positive. Most importantly, however, in terms of the foundational hope of the WWAMI program, the statistics show that these "out-of-state" students tended strongly to return to their states of origin when their training was accomplished. They knew and loved their home states, as would be expected, and were generally eager to return to those surroundings and homelands for their medical practice careers. That dynamic provided the core underpinning of WWAMI's original purpose, namely to provide practitioners (primarily those in primary care / family practice) in states which did not have a medical school within their own borders (Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Idaho), as a regional health-care project envisioned by the University of Washington School of Medicine. The figures show that it has been highly successful, and for those underserved states also essential for healthcare delivery, notwithstanding continued provider shortages still existing.

My intermittent oncology practice-covering experiences in Alaska since 2010 have been remarkable. I have the utmost respect for the quality of cancer care that is delivered in Anchorage---it is truly exceptional. But even more impressive to me are the fortitude and the stamina and the superb competence exemplified by the primary care / family practice / internal medicine practitioners throughout Alaska with whom I interact---in Valdez, Glennallen, Dutch Harbor, Soldotna, Bethel, or wherever. They are, almost without exception, highly skilled individuals who "own their patients' problems" and exhibit the best qualities of a truly dedicated physician. They are a breed not easily to be found in recent decades, and one which is especially scarce outside Alaska. They consistently "step up to the plate." I believe that such character comes largely from being raised in Alaska. I believe that giving such Alaskans the chance to obtain a medical education represents the only likely avenue toward channelling that character into trained practitioners who can return to take up the Alaska challenge in its underserved areas. And that challenge is immense---I have seen burnout in the primary care ranks, and I understand that primary care reimbursements from Medicare are highly difficult in Alaska. But the major truths are that Alaska still raises individuals who are up to those challenges, and that without available medical training there will be no people to meet that need. And the need is intense --- in my coverage for medical oncology, wonderful individual patients come to first attention with far-advanced cancers, and part of that circumstance originates with access barriers, lack of available caregivers, and similar obstacles to early detection. So, what I'm saying from my personal experience is that the WWAMI program at its core intends to train medical students from states without medical schools, and to return them mostly to their states of origin, to supply an otherwise unobtainable group of committed individuals to deliver desperately needed healthcare to a large and mostly rural population of in-need patients. The facts and figures strongly validate the purpose of the program, and its necessity is incontrovertible. Alaska sorely needs such wonderful doctors, and such available care for its residents.

Please consider continuing the funding for this remarkable WWAMI program.

WWAMI is a collaborative medical school among universities in five NW states. Operating for over 44 years, the program has consistently provided some of the best and brightest Alaskans access to the medical education and training necessary for them to return home and serve their communities, helping to address our state's shortage of

physicians. The intent language included in the House budget will eliminate the program.

The elimination of this program will have long term impacts for Alaska's health care system. Without the program, physician shortages will worsen and recruitment challenges will increase. The result will be an increase in health care costs and a decrease in health care quality as we are no longer able to "grow our own" physicians. The WWAMI program is a success and a critical part of the state education and health care infrastructure.

To protect the health of all Alaskans, remove the intent language to eliminate the program from the budget. This program represents one of the most efficient and cost-effective tools Alaska has available to invest in our health delivery system and the health of our people.

Please ensure that funding for the WWAMI program continues. ---- David Notter, M.D.

Sincerely,

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