

# The Village Common of Rhode Island

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*Aging Better Together*

## HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair

Testimony by H. Philip West Jr on May 20, 2025,

in support of 25-H 5984 by Rep. Kathleen A. Fogarty, et. al.

### MEDICAL PRIMARY CARE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Finance Committee for this hearing. **I testify in strong support for 25-H 5984 by Representative Fogarty, legislation that would create a Medical Primary Care Scholarship Program within the Department of Health.**

My name is H. Philip West, Jr., and I serve as a volunteer lobbyist on behalf of The Village Common of Rhode Island. I testify this afternoon from deeply personal experience of Rhode Island's need to bring in more primary care physicians.

**I testify from my own experience with Rhode Island's shortage of primary care physicians. Twenty years ago, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.** During two courses of chemotherapy, my long-time primary care physician retired. For years, my wife and I had appreciated him as a sensitive and skillful doctor. He ran a thriving practice in Providence and trained residents from Brown. He tried to find a younger doctor willing to take over his primary care practice. Despite good contacts at the medical school and his great reputation in the community, he came up empty. In the end, he notified his patients that he had no choice but to dissolve the practice. He added that he would transfer our files to any doctor we could find. He gave us a list of other practices that he hoped would accept us.

Everywhere my wife and I called, the responses were either that they would put us on waiting lists or that they weren't taking new patients. Finally, my oncologist persuaded a colleague who was a primary care physician to accept me as his patient. In time, my wife also connected with a new doctor.

Our struggle was not unique or unusual. During the past seven years, we have convened a neighborhood circle, a group of our neighbors in Pawtucket, within the Village Common. Since the pandemic, we've connected each week with a Thursday afternoon Zoom session. Many in that group have lost their primary care physicians, either through retirement or as groups like Anchor Medical Associates leave Rhode Island. As you know, Anchor has cited the shortage of primary care physicians as a key factor in their decision to leave. Their departure will leave roughly 25,000 patients searching for new primary care providers.

These experiences are symptoms of a larger crisis in Rhode Island's health care system: (1) Primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants are overwhelmed, and (2) By contrast with surgeons, cardiologists, psychiatrists, radiologists, and other specialists, primary care doctors are significantly underpaid.

Last September, the Rhode Island Medical Society published a [\*\*Primary Care Compendium\*\*](#) that addresses the complex factors in the state's shortage of primary care physicians and staff. [\*\*One section of the report\*\*](#) notes that building "sustainable workforce" will require "salary adjustments, loan forgiveness programs, and other retention incentives..." The report quotes one primary care physician: "I tell residents to live in RI and practice in Mass. There you will get loan repayment AND a higher wage."

**Based on these real-world experiences, we in the Village Common strongly affirm the nine specific legislative findings of fact at the top of Representative Fogarty's legislation. We affirm the specific aims of 25-H 5984 to:**

- (1) Create a Primary Care Scholarship Program within the Department of Health,**
- (2) Identify exemplary students who are ready to make a long-term professional commitment to primary care in Rhode Island,**
- (3) Recruit students who match the diversity of Rhode Island's population, and**
- (4) Provide scholarships to bring them here and help them put down roots.**

**The problem for all of us who care about this is that neither those training as primary care providers nor patients who need are organized like corporations who come to the State House seeking financial incentives. This moment calls you to weigh the real but poorly organized needs of future primary care physicians and medical staff against the specific demands of existing businesses.** Those are difficult choices in a tough budget year.

Scholarships for primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and support staff will not by themselves solve the problem, but they are one practical part of a comprehensive solution. Representative Fogarty's legislation to create a Primary Care Scholarship Program within the Department of Health is clearly a crucial next step.

**On behalf of The Village Common, I urge the Finance Committee to recommend 25-H 5984 for passage by the full House of Representatives.**

Respectfully,



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