



NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

NH VOICES / OPINION

HB 349 is something we can do about our looming eye care crisis

Everyone deserves access to safe, affordable health care. As elected officials and health care professionals, one of our top priorities is ensuring New Hampshire's citizens have access to quality care throughout all stages of their lives. To achieve this, we must expand our state's health care workforce by guaranteeing talented providers can practice to the full extent of their education and training.

That is why we are serving as co-sponsors of House Bill 349. This bipartisan legislation increases access to essential vision and medical eye care by authorizing doctors of optometry to perform three in-office laser procedures. These procedures treat glaucoma and remove a film that commonly develops after cataract surgery. They are completed while the patient is sitting upright and do not require the use of general anesthesia. Most importantly, patients can immediately resume regular activi-



Sens. David Rochefort & Sue Prentiss

ties after a procedure is complete, which greatly enhances their quality of life.

Optometrists are doctorate-level professionals who complete four years of post-graduate optometry school, which includes rigorous classroom, laboratory, and clinical training focused on the eye and its components. Optometrists complete courses like medical optometry, general pharmacology, and ocular anatomy and learn about advanced surgical and laser procedures, including the three procedures outlined in HB 349. This education is standardized nationally.

Building on this founda-

tion, HB 349 requires qualified optometrists to meet strict certification criteria before they can perform the procedures. This includes extensive education, training, hands-on patient experience, proctoring requirements, and outcome reporting.

Despite being safely performed by optometrists in 14 other states and within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Community Care Program in those states since the 1990s, performing these procedures is restricted to ophthalmologists in New Hampshire. This regulatory bottleneck can create long waits for appointments, force patients to pay additional co-pays, and require unnecessary travel.

Optometrists practice in all 10 of New Hampshire's counties, providing eye care access to 100 percent of our state's population. In two of those counties, optometrists are the only eye care providers. Simply put, there aren't enough ophthalmologists to perform

these procedures — and that problem is expected to get worse.

A 2024 workforce study published in the journal *Ophthalmology* anticipates a 24 percent increase in demand for these procedures while the number of ophthalmologists is expected to decline 12 percent in the next 10 years in the U.S. At the same time, the number of students applying to optometry school is increasing. Allowing optometrists to perform the procedures included in HB 349 brings care closer to home, relieves pressure on overburdened specialists, and helps recruit and retain highly skilled optometrists to live and work in our state.

Advances in medicine and technology are helping people live longer. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total population in the U.S. grew about one percent between 2023 and 2024 while the number of people age 65 and older increased three percent. New Hampshire is currently tied with Vermont as the

state with the second oldest population, and in less than five years, more than 26 percent of residents in our state will be over age 60. This will further increase demand for eye care when we already have difficulty attracting health care providers. This is true in all parts of our state, not just rural areas.

Forty years ago, when states began allowing optometrists to treat patients with eye diseases like glaucoma, research showed that vision impairment decreased by 12 percent. Authorizing optometrists to perform the procedures included in HB 349 would allow patients to seek care more immediately and closer to home from the provider of their choice. It also decreases the risk of reduced vision and blindness, which can occur when patients delay or do not seek care because of access issues.

Every day we read about gaps in primary care, but there is less attention given to eye care. By enacting HB 349, New Hampshire can

reduce the cost of care, provide more options for access, and recruit and retain highly trained optometrists. We hope Governor Ayotte agrees.

Sen. David Rochefort, R-Littleton, represents District 1. He is a pharmacist and chairs the Health & Human Services Committee. Sen. Sue Prentiss, D-West Lebanon, represents District 5. She is a paramedic and member of the Health & Human Services Committee.

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