Dalhousie Medicine

Student Affairs and Wellness Liasons (SAWLS) Handbook

Revised October 2026



DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF MEDICINE

Background

Student Affairs and Wellness Liaisons (SAWLs) are undergraduate medical students at Dalhousie who have been elected by their classmates at each campus. Two SAWLs provide student representation for each of the Med1 to Med4 classes, supporting peers who are experiencing academic and/or personal challenges. SAWLs interactions with peers are confidential unless critical safety risks are apparent in which case the SAWLs are required to urgently contact Student Affairs or relevant emergency services and follow up with Student Affairs.

The SAWLs liaise closely with the Student Affairs Office at each campus to review concerns raised by students and to direct fellow students to Dalhousie based and external professional resources as necessary. In addition, SAWLs promote medical student wellness through organization and promotion of activities and discussions with a wellness lens.

These positions were created in the 2015/2016 school year under the guidance of students from the Class of 2018 with Sharon Forward, former Director of Resident and Student Affairs, and Dr. Michael Teehan, then Assistant Dean of Student Affairs.





Expectations

- Attend monthly meetings with Student Affairs or provide email updates in lieu
  - Updates on important issues that Student Affairs should be aware
  - General programming updates
  - End of Year Debrief during April Meeting
    - Thank and recognize the efforts of all SAWLs and the important role played as well to wish farewell to the outgoing Med 4’s as they head to residency.
    - Debrief and collaborate on the overall year for SAWLs, successes, challenges, and feedback.
    - Opportunity to discuss changes for next academic year
    - Revision of resources/handbook
- Provide feedback and communicate with SAWLS team members and Student Affairs staff outside of regular meetings when necessary
- Maintain confidentiality always with the exception of a threat to safety of any student or other individual.

SAWL Responsibilities

Liaison

Student Affairs and Wellness Liaisons are intermediaries between students in their respective classes at Dal Med and the Student Affairs Office. This is implicit in the title of the position and the most emphasis should be placed on ‘liaison’. Liaison means communication or cooperation which facilitates a close working relationship between people or organizations.



Triage

At its core SAWLs should operate as a triage and navigation service for fellow students, providing them with resources which allow them to seek more professional support. In almost all scenarios this should involve liaising with the Student Affairs Office at your campus for guidance and further support for students.

To avoid having SAWLs be put in a difficult position, classes should be made aware SAWLs are ‘boots on the ground’ to help connect with fellow students who may be struggling with personal and/or academic issues.

Confidential Listening

While SAWLs are always happy to lend an ear, their time must be respected, and it must be noted that they do not have professional training or experience.

Students should expect any conversation they have with a SAWL will be kept confidential in terms of their classmates and should also expect the issue may be brought forth to the Student Affairs Office for further discussion and advice as required.

This should be likened to seeing a patient on a clinical service and reporting back to staff prior to deciding on a diagnosis and treatment plan. This should be explained as such to peers by the SAWLs and supported by the **Terms of Reference**.

Link to a full list of Wellness Resources provided by Student Affairs here.

Onboarding

The ***onboarding*** session will be organized and communicated by Student Affairs in collaboration with the Med 2 SAWLs at each campus. This session will be organized following the election of the Med 1 SAWLs.

The purpose of the session is as follows:

1. To welcome the new reps and provide an overview of their role.
2. To provide & advise reps of the Student Affairs Wellness Resource document.
3. To discuss sample scenarios and how they were handled
4. To brainstorm class-specific events based on previous years, timing, and feedback.
5. To respond to questions, concerns, and ideas

Debriefing

The ***debrief*** session will be organized and communicated by Student Affairs at each campus. This session will be organized in early April (ensuring Med 4 outgoing reps can attend before graduation/beginning residency).

The purpose of the session is as follows:

1. To recognize the efforts of all SAWLs and the important role played as well to wish farewell to the outgoing Med 4's as they head to residency.
2. To debrief and collaborate on the overall year for SAWLs, outlining any successes, challenges, and feedback.

**Funding will be provided for these events from the Student Affairs office or via the Class of 83 Wellness Endowment.*

Outside SAWLs Scope

Class Dynamics

Each of the classes at Dalhousie medical school is unique with different internal forces at play which constitute the class dynamic. Though SAWLs are charged with providing support for peers, solving more large-scale, class dynamics is not within their defined role. Collegial and professional communication is a responsibility of all students.

Med2 SAWLs are not SAWLs for Med1 Class

Prior to election and onboarding of Med1 SAWLs in late October/early November, Med2 SAWLs should not be the SAWLs for the Med1 class. Med1s who are having difficulties will consistently be encouraged to reach out to the Student Affairs Office or their Med Buddies directly. Med Buddies are encouraged to bring any matter they would like assistance with to the attention of the Student Affairs Office.

SAWLs Fatigue

SAWLs fatigue is similar to compassion fatigue where a SAWL may begin to feel overwhelmed, emotionally disconnected, have reduced feelings of empathy and be exhausted by the role that they have been elected to fill. Should a SAWL find themselves experiencing compassion fatigue or burnout they should reach out to the Student Affairs Office for support.

Some recommendations to limit the risk of compassion fatigue or burnout are understanding how to build boundaries, saying “no” to tasks that can be declined, regularly doing self-check-ins to notice your feelings and physical reaction to stress, and practicing self-care habits.



Structural Support

There are various layers of support that SAWLs can access or rely on to minimize the risk of fatigue:



List of Structural Support

1. Student Affairs Team

Connect with the Student Affairs team for support with programming or follow-up on advocacy pieces that have come up from class feedback

2. Peer SAWLs

Connect with your fellow SAWLs team members and keep each other in the loop when you need support

3. Personal Supports

Connect regularly with your own personal supports for counselling and debriefing
Reminder of our resource list on our website and resource guide

4. Class Presidents

Connect with the class president for your class to get support with programming or to brainstorm

Med Buddies Program

Facilitated by the incoming Med2 SAWLs, the Med Buddies Program is designed to pair a more senior medical student, most often a Med2, with an incoming Med1 student. Ideally the Med2 SAWLs would solicit participation of incoming Med1 and Med2 (or in some cases Med3 if the numbers of Med2 participants are low) by early July of the incoming Med1 year.



Previously this has been effectively accomplished using a Google Forms platform. The pairing is usually made based on similarities in personality, life situation and hobbies/interests.

The goal of this program is to provide incoming Med1s with a more senior medical student who they can freely ask questions to or can go to if they have an issue throughout their medical training, especially in their first couple of months prior to the election of SAWLs for their class.

To ensure that all Med Buddies can meet during the first few weeks of the school year, Med2 SAWLs should attempt to host an event at each campus during Orientation Week or shortly after.

Scenario Examples

What to do if a student approaches you about an issue:

1. Offer to chat about how they are feeling (maintain confidence)
2. Connect them to the Student Affairs Office
    a. Accompanying student to the office for a drop-in meeting,
    b. Send an email to connect the student with the Student Affairs Office,
    c. Provide the student with contact information to the Student Affairs Office for them to initiate the reach out.
3. Inform them of resources for counselling on and off campus and how Student Affairs can assist.
4. Offer to keep in touch with them over time if they are comfortable and welcoming such engagement

What to do if a student's problems come unexpectedly or overwhelm you:

1. Reflect on boundary setting within your role as the SAWL. Direct them to the Student Affairs Office and offer resources for mental wellness.
2. Keep in touch with them when you are available (within your boundaries)
3. Reach out to Student Affairs for your own support and guidance as a SAWL and a student.

What to do when a student approaches asking how to help their peers who are struggling:

1. Ask for permission to approach the struggling student about their problem
2. If your permission is granted, follow example A) above.
3. The option to recommend any student reach out to Student Affairs with concerns regarding a classmate / peer for advice and guidance.

What to do if a student approaches you about an issue you deem to be safety-related

(i.e. student failed an exam, struggling academically and interpersonally, argument with partner, and voicing hopelessness and/or intent to self-harm)

1. You have a duty to inform/involve Student Affairs understanding this breaks confidentiality.
2. Offer to chat about how they are feeling and offer support as further plan is developed and implemented.

What to Expect

Common Concerns and Questions listed by Med Year

Student Affairs keeps an up to date Resource List on our ***website*** and have compiled a resource guide for quick access.

Have a resource you wish to add?
Send it to alvaro@dal.ca



MED 1	MED 2
• How to prepare for exams • How to cope with exam failure • Where to find resources • Transition to Med 2 • What should I do over the summer	• Transition to Clerkship • How to prepare for exams • How to cope with exam failure • Where to find resources • Track Selection • What should I do over the summer
MED 3	**MED 4**
• What is the clerkship experience like • How to cope with difficult clinical experiences and imposter syndrome • How do you plan time for the fun activities/hobbies • How do you prepare/plan for M4 electives • How did you decide which career/program to choose • Transition/Demands of M4	• How do you prepare/plan for M4 electives • How to keep up with performance on electives • How to navigate and prepare for CaRMs • Match Results • How to cope with career plan uncertainty • How to prepare for the transition to residency, M5, or next career phase

SAWLs Budget

Funding for SAWLs events will be provided from the Student Affairs Office or via the Class of 83 Wellness Endowment in recognition of the contribution towards wellness programming including the contribution made by SAWLs.

General Budget and Timeline

Annual funding depends on the amount of funds generated through interest on the Class of 83 Wellness Endowment fund and is also split with the Health and Wellness Reps and Resuscitators.

Typically, the Class of 83 Wellness Endowment fund is split between Thriving Together ($3000), Health and Wellness Reps Programming, DMSS Programming, SAWLs programming across all campuses (DMNS, DMNB, CBMC), and the Resuscitators Peer Tutoring program (at a rate of $21/hr).

The total amount available for SAWLs programming is determined by DMSS in consultation with Student Affairs after the DMSS budget approval in October of every year.

To ensure that funds are appropriately allocated and utilized, SAWLs reps shall submit a proposed budget and keep an up-to-date record of actual expenditures as follows:

- November – Submit a proposed budget for the academic year
- January – Update actual expenditures and review the proposed budget for the winter term
- April – Submit a proposed budget for the new academic year (including summer and fall programming for September)

SAWLs Budget

Accessing Funding

All SAWLs programming is supported by the MD Class of ‘83 Wellness Fund.

Event expenses include things like catering, space bookings, and other things that support the mission of DMSS (p. 3, section 2, DMSS Constitution).

All SAWLs reps should meet with VP Finance DMSS in the fall (November after elections) to discuss and organize budget access.

Submitting Expenses

Students are required to submit programming receipts for reimbursement through, Chrome River.

Claims can be added as a miscellaneous expense using allocation/account number: 71224 (MD Class of ‘83 Wellness Fund).

Please submit in the description:

- Coordinators/Organizers
- Date of Event
- Number of Students Attending
- Activities/Description of Event

Note: The Class of ‘83 ***will not*** *reimburse any expenses unless there is a detailed receipt*

For any issues or questions, please contact Tyler.Hall@dal.ca.

Submitting Expenses

Dalhousie invoice requirements: for invoices to be processed by financial services, an official invoice must include the following:

- Printed company letterhead with full company name and address. The payee must match the company letterhead.
- Date (event or service date)
- Invoice number
- A detailed description of services rendered
- The HST registration number and amount; or if the company collects under $30,000 per year, the company must state on the invoice that they “are a small supplier which earns less than $30,000 per year in accordance with Bill C62, Section 148, and have no requirements to collect HST”
- Invoice to be billed to Dalhousie University
- Businesses performing business in Nova Scotia are registered and in good standing with Registry of Joint Stocks, or if the business is outside Nova Scotia it is registered with Corporation Canada, RJS or other Provincial agencies

Please ensure the invoice includes the above components. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Accounts Payable, Financial Services, at finpay@dqal.ca for any more information you may require.

Ineligible Expenses

The following items cannot be billed from program funding:

- Gift cards
- Alcohol and other substances
- Speaker thank you gifts

Budget Example

Event	Timeline	Budget	Justification/Discription
Hot chocolate in lounge	Mid-December	$25	As a pre-holiday break wellness event includes planning a holiday cookie swap in the lounge and hot chocolate for everyone to go with the cookies.
Treats in the lounge	Feb/Mar. around MET II exams	$200	Involves getting a plethora of baked goods including vegan and gluten free options from a local cafe. This is always well-received around stressful times (exams)
Therapy dogs on campus	Jan/Feb	Free	For combating winter blues and med II stress
Trauma in Medicine Workshop	-	$100	Collab with the peer support group to run a workshop where students can discuss difficult/traumatic clinical experiences and hear from residents/physicians how they coped with these experiences as a learner. Budget is to cover snacks and speaker favours
Printing costs	Throughout the year	$20	For occasional posters and for doing up the class bulletin board
Yoga at Oxygen	End of January	$200	Collaborate with Oxygen Yoga Studio to host a private yoga class for Dal Med as a stress relieving activity before exams ($10/person). Oxygen charges a fee for this so last year we asked students who participated to pay ~10$ each.

Examples of SAWLs Events

Shared by upper year SAWLs

- Wellness walks
- Indirect activities like writing a message on a whiteboard in the student lounge, tea station, or snack station.
- Virtual drop-ins — specifically in M3/M4 when everyone is distributed throughout hospitals/ provinces!
- Movie Night

(more examples listed on the next page)





(e.g. "*Take What You Need*" pull tab posters)

Previous SAWLs Events

Treats in the lounge

A huge hit with our class! This can look like pastries from Steve-o-Reno's Cappuccino shared in the med lounge once or twice per semester, typically around stressful times/exams.

Or, coffee to go with the treats *(check with the DMSS for a hot drink canister)*.

Class Yoga

We worked with oxygen yoga, a local studio on Doyle Street to get a class for med students

It cost about $10 per student for a class of 20-25 people, and this was also a hit! People enjoyed having an organized reason to spend some time with each other in a wellness activity

“Career Time Capsule”

We organized this for our class where folks could fill out a form about their goals and thoughts about where they’d like to be and what they think their interests are.

We keep the info, and we plan to send it back out in 4th year.

Trauma in Medicine Talk
with residents across various specialties

We partnered with one of our classmates who had started a peer support group to put on a panel where residents spoke about some traumatic clinical experiences and how they coped and any advice they had for how to manage these as learners.

Examples may include: fainting in the OR, having a pt die, seeing acutely ill patients for the first time, etc.)

“Take What You Need” pull tab posters

We organized this for our class where folks could fill out a form about their goals and thoughts about where they’d like to be and what they think their interests are.

We keep the info, and we plan to send it back out in 4th year.





General Timeline

1. **Monthly Meetings with Student Affairs**
September - April

2. **Elections - Hosted in the fall to choose M1 SAWLs**
October

3. **Meet & Greet and Onboarding with Student Affairs and SAWLs**
November

4. **Proposed Budget Submission for Fall Term**
November

5. **Fall Term Actual Budget Submissions & Proposed Budget for Winter Term**
Early January

6. **End of Year Debrief with Student Affairs**
April

7. **Transition (M4) SAWLs**
May/Jun

8. **Transition (M1-M3) SAWLs**
August/September