

Testimony
Senate Bill 2125 – Relating to the Health Care Professional
Student Loan Repayment Program
Senate Human Services Committee
Senator Judy Lee, Chairwoman
January 12, 2021

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services Committee:

I am Holly Johnson, Licensed Board Certified Behavior Analyst, member and Past President of the North Dakota Association for Behavior Analysis (NDABA), and an appointed member of the ND Governor's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force. I live Minot, and provide behavioral health services through the Developmental Disabilities Behavioral Health Services (DD BHS) Field Services division out of the Life Skills & Transition Center. My service delivery area spreads from the Devils Lake region to the Williston Basin region, and as far east as New Rockford. I deliver services in 14 ND counties identified as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the ND Primary Care Office. I am currently the sole traveling Behavior Analyst (BA) in those areas. It is a personal, core value for me to provide services to the underserved regions and rural areas of this great state. I consult with families, schools, and private providers serving people with complex behavioral needs. I have worked collaboratively with individuals, their caregivers, and their teams of professionals in behavioral assessment, skills training, and integrated staff interventions for clients with acute and chronic mental illness (e.g., mood, anxiety, personality, and psychotic disorders) as well as acute and chronic medical illness (e.g., severe seizure disorders, rare chromosomal abnormalities, feeding disorders and post-surgical rehabilitation), which occur comorbidly with developmental and/or intellectual disability.

The Health Council administers, develops, and establishes criteria for this student loan program. During a special meeting held December 16th, 2020, Health Council members voted to move forward with legislation to add BAs to NDCC Chapter 43-12.3-06 e. In the attachments I provided, you will see how BAs compare to the other behavioral health professions that qualify for this student loan program, including the number of ND licensed professionals in each discipline. You can also see the concentration of BAs geographically across ND. In ND, 91% of counties are fully or partially designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. The demand for BAs in ND greatly exceeds the supply, especially in addition to the geographical location of professionals by comparison to those identified mental health professional shortage areas.

I applied for this student loan repayment program in March of 2018 and was automatically denied because my profession was not included in the language of recognized behavioral health professions. I also supervise BA graduate students. Four out of twelve of those students (or 1 in 3), who were ND residents during their study, have left to pursue better job opportunities (e.g., more pay, better incentives, higher insurance reimbursement rates, and loan repayment programs) in other states (specifically Washington, Michigan, Connecticut, and California). We will not be able to recruit and retain adequate workforce, especially to serve the rural mental health professional shortage areas of ND, without incentives such as this student loan program available to my profession.

In summary, please consider approving the added language to SB 2125 for BAs to be a recognized behavioral health profession. It is imperative to include BAs as recognized behavioral health professionals to retain and entice more professionals to this state, and ultimately, to better serve the

remote, rural, and underserved regions who lack BAs as an option for their behavioral health needs.

All opinion expressed here is my own. These opinions in no way represent the Department of Human Services or the Life Skills and Transition Center, all of which I am actively involved with, adding to my unique perspective contained in this testimony. This testimony has been provided on my personal time.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony. If I can be of assistance during this time of deliberation, please contact me at holly.johnson.bcba@outlook.com. This concludes my testimony.

Sincerely,

Holly Johnson, MS, BCBA, LBA

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