

Testimony of Briselda Hernandez Herrera in support of SB2018
To the House Appropriations Education and Environment Division
Monday, March 17, 2025

Chairman Nathe, Vice Chairman Swiontek, and Committee Members,

My name is Briselda Hernandez Herrera, and I am the Executive Director of Souris Basin Planning Council (SBPC). SBPC serves **North Dakota Region 2** comprised of Bottineau, Burke, McHenry, Mountrail, Pierce, Renville, and Ward counties.

I come before you today in support of the Regional Workforce Impact Program (RWIP) under SB2018. RWIP provides the necessary funding to advance regional workforce recruitment and retention initiatives. It aligns with our regional economic development strategy goal of preparing and attracting a more robust and resilient workforce to meet employment needs while providing essential infrastructure supports for workforce participation throughout the region. As designed, the program encourages regional collaboration, leading to greater impact. Below are some examples illustrating how our region has benefited from this program.

Daycare Infrastructure

Our region is experiencing a significant shortage of childcare providers. In fact, only 31 percent of potential daycare demand is being met statewide, with Mountrail County having the lowest rate in our region at only six percent. Ragamuffins Ranch Daycare in Stanley received a \$500 thousand RWIP grant to expand into a larger facility, increasing the number of slots available in Mountrail County. Owner, Carol Maurer, worked closely with Childcare Aware and the Small Business Development Center to build a growth strategy and ensure business success. Souris Basin Planning Council assisted Carol Maurer with pursuing additional funding opportunities; Ragamuffins Ranch Daycare received \$2 million from the Mountrail County Job Development Authority (JDA). We are committed to seeing this project through and are therefore providing project support at no cost. The project will break ground in April/May.

Education and Training Infrastructure

The dental industry has faced a persistent challenge— a shortage of dental assistants and hygienists. There are not enough graduates in our region or state to meet industry demands or patient needs. While Minnesota has 15 accredited institutions helping to fill these roles, North Dakota had only one. Both dental assistants and dental hygienists are listed as in-demand occupations by Job Service ND. Recognizing that we are not training or retaining enough local residents to meet the demand, Dakota College of Bottineau (DCB) added a dental assistant and a dental hygienist program to a new Center for Technical Education being housed in downtown Minot. DCB received RWIP funding for additional training equipment. This program is a long-term solution that will mitigate the concerns of the region, as the program graduates up to 12 new dental assistants every two years.

Regional Workforce Attraction and Retention

With a shrinking and aging workforce, a record low number of unemployed workers to fill jobs, and the number of people looking for work near an all-time low, our region needs to

strategically build its labor pool to build and maintain a thriving economy. Our region needs to grow its labor force by bringing in more workers, but workforce attraction is hard work. People are less likely to move than ever before, and in rural communities, more people are moving out than in. Additionally, communities and organizations do not have the resources and capacity to lead this work on their own. Communities and organizations are taxed with more work to do, and the same community leaders are wearing too many hats. SBPC received an RWIP grant to implement a regional and unified strategy for workforce attraction and retention that focuses on improving the image of the region and reducing the barriers to in-migration. Our project falls under “talent attraction marketing and local implemented strategies,” and consists of the following: defining a regional identity and messaging (while helping rural communities find their “niche”); gathering content and stories about living in the region; and developing a platform to house content and share messaging. Communities and organizations in our region are increasingly motivated to work together to cultivate a strong regional economy. Therefore, we will utilize the momentum gained through this initiative to develop additional short-term and long-term strategies. Although the project is considered a one-time expense, it serves as a starting point for developing a comprehensive regional workforce development initiative.

As demonstrated, the RWIP program has made a significant impact in our region. **I am requesting your support for RWIP with a funding amount of \$10 million.** Thank you for your time and consideration.

Briselda Hernandez Herrera
briselda@sourisbasin.org
701.712.7308