

TO: House Human Services Committee

DATE: 1/27/2025

RE: HB 1452

Madam Chair and members of the House Human Services Committee. My name is Sara Wiedrich and I am a family nurse practitioner who specializes in diabetes management. I am writing to express my strong support for House Bill No 1452, relating to minimum standards for coverage of antiobesity medication; to provide for a report to the legislative assembly; to provide for application; and to provide an expiration date

As a nurse practitioner and resident of North Dakota, I believe this legislation is a crucial step toward addressing the growing health crisis related to obesity and its associated diseases.

Obesity is a complex, chronic condition that affects millions of individuals and places a significant burden on both public health and healthcare systems. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in North Dakota, approximately **36.1% of adults** are classified as obese. This rate is above the national average and underscores the urgency of addressing obesity within our state. Despite efforts in diet, exercise, and other lifestyle interventions, many individuals continue to struggle with obesity, often due to factors beyond their control, such as genetics, environment, and metabolism. Antiobesity medications, when used as part of a comprehensive treatment plan, can play a critical role in helping individuals achieve and maintain a healthier weight, which can lead to improved overall health and a reduction in the risk of serious, life-threatening conditions.

Obesity is linked to numerous health conditions, including but not limited to:

- **Heart Disease** (including coronary artery disease)
- **Stroke**
- **High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)**
- **Type 2 Diabetes**
- **Sleep Apnea**
- **Osteoarthritis** (particularly in weight-bearing joints)
- **Fatty Liver Disease**
- **Breast Cancer, Colon Cancer, and Endometrial Cancer**
- **Depression and Anxiety**
- **Infertility and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)**
- **Chronic Kidney Disease**

Unfortunately, for many individuals, the high cost of these medications is a barrier to access. By ensuring that insurance plans cover these treatments, we would make antiobesity medications more accessible to those who need them most, and reduce the long-term healthcare costs associated with obesity-related illnesses.

Obesity affects millions of individuals across all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds in the United States. Beyond its impact on physical and mental well-being, obesity carries a solid financial burden that echoes throughout the nation's healthcare system, economy, and society. **A report released by the Milken Institute in 2020 shows that the annual cost and the economic impact of obesity in the United States exceeds \$1.4 trillion.** This number includes costs associated with obesity treatment and obesity-related conditions and costs associated with attendance and productivity at work as they relate to obesity. The specific cost of treating obesity-related conditions in North Dakota isn't widely reported, however we can consider broader trends and estimates for the U.S. as a whole, and apply them to our state for a rough idea.

Obesity-related medical care costs have mirrored the rising rates of obesity in the US. As the disease of obesity continues to impact individuals across the nation, the burden on the healthcare system has become increasingly evident. Individuals with obesity tend to spend more on healthcare compared to those without obesity, primarily due to the increased prevalence of obesity-related health conditions. **According to the CDC, as of 2019, medical costs for adults with obesity were \$1,861 higher than those without obesity.**

The costs associated with treating obesity-related conditions are not only a concern for individuals with obesity but also pose a significant financial challenge for the healthcare industry.

The direct costs of obesity primarily revolve around healthcare expenditures, as individuals with obesity are at a higher risk of developing various obesity-related health conditions. These direct costs can include:

- **Medical Treatment:** Medical consultations, diagnostic tests, prescription drugs, and surgical procedures contribute significantly to the direct costs of obesity.
- **Preventive Services:** This includes weight management programs, nutritional counseling, physical activity interventions, and behavioral therapies. The expenses associated with these preventive services add to the direct costs of obesity.
- **Diagnostic Testing:** These tests are necessary to diagnose, monitor disease progression, and evaluate treatment effectiveness, resulting in additional healthcare expenses.
- **Bariatric Surgeries:** These surgeries, including gastric bypass and gastric sleeve procedures, come with significant costs, including pre-operative evaluations, surgical fees, hospital stays, and post-operative care.
- **Medications:** These may include drugs for diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, and other associated diseases. The costs of these medications contribute to the direct expenses associated with obesity.

The secondary costs of obesity extend beyond direct healthcare expenditures and encompass many economic, social, and environmental factors. These costs arise as a result of the widespread implications that obesity has on various aspects of society. Here are some critical secondary costs associated with obesity:

- **Reduced Workforce Productivity:** Obesity can lead to decreased work performance, increased absenteeism, and higher rates of disability. This results in lost productivity for employers, lower economic output, and decreased overall workforce efficiency.
- **Education and Training:** Obesity can adversely affect educational attainment and job training. Individuals with obesity may face challenges accessing quality education and skill development programs, limiting their employment opportunities and potentially requiring additional resources for remedial education.
- **Reduced Quality of Life:** Obesity can have a significant impact on an individual's quality of life, leading to increased healthcare utilization, diminished social interactions, and decreased overall well-being. The associated costs include psychological counseling, social support programs, and reduced life satisfaction.
- **Environmental Impact:** Obesity contributes to environmental costs through increased energy consumption, transportation requirements, and the production of excess waste. This includes higher fuel consumption for transportation, increased greenhouse gas emissions, and waste management expenses associated with excess food consumption.

This information demonstrates the huge financial impact obesity has on both individuals and the healthcare system. Addressing obesity early, through prevention and effective management, could help reduce these costs over time.

I urge you to support this legislation and to consider the positive impact it will have on improving the health and well-being of individuals struggling with obesity. Ensuring insurance coverage for antiobesity medications will not only improve individual outcomes but will also contribute to the broader public health goal of reducing the societal impact of obesity.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. I look forward to seeing the positive changes this legislation will bring about for many individuals and families in North Dakota.

Sincerely,
Sara Wiedrich

RESOURCES:

CDC Obesity Data and Statistics, Updated 1/30/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data-and-statistics/index.html>

“Weighing Down America: 2020 Update” co-authored by Claude Lopez, Joseph Bendix, and Ken Sagynbekov. Retrieved from <https://milkeninstitute.org/content-hub/news-releases/economic-impact-obesity-increased-14-trillion-says-milken-institute>

“How Much Does Obesity Cost the US?” Obesity Medicine Association. Retrieved from <https://obesitymedicine.org/blog/health-economic-impact-of-obesity/>