

Re: HB No. 1612 Relating to the establishment of the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine for mental health support and certification assistance

Dear North Dakota Legislative Assembly,

I am writing this letter in support of House Bill Number 1612. From my first-hand experience as a FAA Aviation Medical Examiner, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of the immense benefits this bill would provide to the state of North Dakota and pilots around the Midwest.

I provide Aviation Medical Examiner services to pilots in North Dakota and the surrounding states, helping them navigate the FAA certification process. On a monthly basis I interact with pilots who require further evaluations due to a history of mental health or substance use, if ever in their lifetime. A majority of these pilots require extensive evaluations prior to FAA Medical Certification which can take a minimum of one year, but often several years to complete before being certified to fly. It costs the pilot seeking certification thousands to tens of thousands of dollars to obtain these evaluations just for consideration of certification. Evaluations include psychiatry assessments, cognitive screening by neuropsychologists, random drug screens, multiple visits with a special Aviation Medical Examiner called a "HIMS AME", amongst other evaluations. A HIMS AME has additional training from the FAA to assist with aeromedical certification for pilots having a history of drug/substance abuse and/or psychiatric history such as attention deficit disorder, anxiety, depression, personality disorder, alcohol use disorder, prior DUI(s), marijuana abuse history, to name a few of the most common conditions requiring evaluation. A majority of pilots stop pursuing this process before ever reaching the certification decision.

The paperwork required to certify these pilots is extensive, and the number of resources needed is substantial. Due to these factors, there are very few HIMS AMEs across the country, and access for North Dakota pilots is very limited. With continuing pilot shortages, a need for proper evaluations and continued monitoring and support of pilots with prior and current psychiatric conditions and/or prior substance abuse/dependence who have achieved sobriety is necessary. Streamlining this process with all required specialists in one location would be monumental.

This bill would allow for the University of North Dakota John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences to be a cornerstone center of excellence in the pursuit of ensuring and maintaining National Airspace System safety, while supporting the pilots who function within it and those interested in contributing. By having a center with abundant resources focusing on the process by which pilots obtain mental health and substance evaluations, certification consideration times should significantly improve and more pilots would complete the evaluation process.

The University of North Dakota John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences is already known as one of the top aviation colleges in the country. House Bill Number 1612 would be instrumental in supporting their efforts to ensure pilots' mental health is as much of a priority as their aviation education.

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