

Testimony
Senate Bill 2089 – Health Care Professional Student Loan Repayment Program
House Human Services Committee
Representative Robin Weisz, Chairman
March 17, 2021

Chairman Weisz and Members of the House Human Services Committee:

I am Holly Johnson, a Licensed Board Certified Behavior Analyst, founding member and Past President of the North Dakota Association for Behavior Analysis (NDABA), and an appointed member of the Governor's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Task Force. I live in Minot, and provide behavioral health services through the Developmental Disabilities Behavioral Health Services (DD BHS) 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 southeast as New Rockford. I deliver services in 14 ND counties identified as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas by the 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 person, core value for me to provide services to the underserved regions and rural areas of this great state. I consult with families, schools, and provide providers serving people with complex behavioral needs, providing behavioral intervention billed through Medicaid, private insurance, or private contracts. I have worked collaboratively with individuals, their caregivers, and their team 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.

In 1994, the North Dakota Legislature established student loan repayments for certain healthcare professions to increase the number of providers in the areas of the state with defined health professional needs. Since then, loan repayments have

been made available to physicians, clinical psychologists, advance practice nurses, and physician assistants. Behavioral health professionals, which currently includes licensed addiction counselor, licensed professional counselor, licensed social worker, registered nurse, or speciality practice registered nurse, were added in 2016. Further information on the State Loan Repayment Programs can be found in the attached fact sheet and on the Primary Care Office website: www.ndhealth.gov/pco/main.asp in the Program Resources tab.

The State Health Council administers, develops, and establishes criteria for this student loan repayment program. During a special meeting held December 16th, 2020, Health Council members voted to move forward with legislation to add BAs to NDCC Chapter 43-12.30-06 e. The amended language in SB 2125 will allow the State Health Council to consider awarding a student repayment loan to a licensed behavior analyst along with the current five disciplines listed in this section of NDCC. The selection criteria, state award, community match, and eligibility for participation would not change. Adopting this legislation would merely make us and eligible profession for this program.

In the attachments I provided, you will see how BAs compare to the other behavioral health professionals that are currently eligible, including the number of ND licensed professionals in each discipline (as of 1/1/2021). 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. Above the side-by-side comparison, you will see the discipline areas BAs provide services to nationally. BAs can provide behavioral health services to literally any demographic or group of people. ASD is the highest nationally due to mandated insurance coverage and funding for services available specific to that population of people.

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 reimbursements, 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 Licensed Behavior Analysts to be a recognized behavioral health profession. It is imperative to include Behavior Analysts as eligible behavioral health professionals to retain and entice more professionals to this state. Ultimately, to better serve the remote, rural, and underserved regions who lack Behavior Analysts 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 & 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. If I can be of any assistance during this time of deliberation, please contact me at holly.johnson.bcba@outlook.com. This concludes my testimony and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

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