



Testimony

Bill: HB #1142

Senate Appropriations Committee

March 23, 2021

Chairman Holmberg

Chairman Holmberg and members of the Senate Appropriations Committee, my name is Michael Curtis. I serve as the Executive Director of the McKenzie County Healthcare Systems, Inc. (MCHS) in Watford City, North Dakota and am currently in the process of transitioning into the CEO role. I am here to provide support for the critical work of the North Dakota Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program.

The position of determining which programs to fund is daunting under the best of circumstances; how much more so during a pandemic? This pandemic has impacted North Dakota residents physically, psychologically, and economically, leaving many with a sense of uncertainty. And yet every situation can provide learning opportunities. This pandemic exposed weaknesses in North Dakota's healthcare infrastructure; one in particular stands above the rest—"staffed bed." The cause was lack of available nursing staff.

The Critical Access Hospital within MCHS has 24 brand new licensed beds; we were able to staff 10. The limitation was available nursing staff. The short-term solution was, and has always been, travel staff. However, we were already using a notable number of travel staff in multiple departments before the pandemic. The effects of this approach were muted by the national staffing shortage. We then reduced elective surgeries in order to pull surgical nurses to the inpatient floor. This did not expand our capacity; it merely filled the staffing gaps created by staff attrition due to Covid-19 infection, isolation, and quarantine. The reliance on travel staff was concerning before; the pandemic made it untenable.

Our inaugural LPN class began in the Fall of 2020 in concert with Williston State College, with the goal to move into an RN program in the near future. This pivotal milestone will help reduce our long-term nursing shortage. However, it will not address the number of qualified applicants to the program. An increase in the number of qualified applicants is best achieved through exposure to healthcare careers in high school. AHEC supports many programs; however, its support to expand HOSA-Future Health Professionals chapters is one way to increase healthcare career exposure in high schools.

There is a national shortage of healthcare professionals. The long-term solution is not to recruit staff away from other states. The long-term solution is to "grow our own."

Therefore, I urge support to the ND AHEC program and bill HB #1142.

Michael Curtis

Executive Director

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McKenzie County Healthcare Systems, Inc.