



# WEST RIVER HEALTH SERVICES

March 8, 2021

Members of the Sixty-Seventh Legislative Assembly of North Dakota:

Good morning Chairwoman Lee and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity this morning to support HB1142, and specifically the North Dakota Area Health Education Center (AHEC). My name is Matt Shahan, and for the last 5 years I have had the amazing duty of serving as the CEO of West River Health Services in Hettinger. I'll ask that you humor me for just a moment as I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank and praise the 200+ healthcare heroes that I am honored to represent under the West River umbrella. During this pandemic our amazing staff has gone above and beyond what we have ever asked of them, and they have continuously delivered. I hope that as we move forward we never take for granted the magnitude of responsibility we ask of these heroes. I also want to quickly thank our partners in hospitals and health systems around this great state who stepped up in collaboration on behalf of our citizens during this pandemic.

As you may know, WRHS is an award winning Critical Access Hospital (CAH) that prides itself on providing high quality healthcare, close to home. We believe that rural residents deserve the same high quality of care as our urban counterparts and work tirelessly to deliver for them. We provide not just Family Medicine, but Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, Radiology, Podiatry, Obstetrics, and General Surgery. For 71 years we have worked hard to develop a rural workforce that can handle such a wide range of services. We house an accelerated LPN program in partnership with Bismarck State College; host rural nursing rotations for various nursing programs in the state; are a Rural Opportunities in Medical Education (ROME) site through UND; and are a Rural Training Track site in partnership with the University of North Dakota School of Medicine where 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Residents complete their training in rural practice. Even so we struggle greatly to recruit and retain qualified staff to our rural communities that we serve. It is vital now more than ever that we succeed in the recruitment and retention of qualified workers and their families to rural North Dakota. Healthcare is one of the primary economic drivers for rural communities, and without our hospitals and health systems, many communities would fail to thrive.

Recruitment was already a challenge for rural facilities, and the pandemic only amplified those struggles. Travel nursing jobs in large urban centers are plentiful, locum tenens opportunities have grown significantly, and even competition with our own Department of Health during the pandemic have only added to the difficulties we face.

All of these difficulties add up and make the work of ND AHEC even more important. In partnership with AHEC, rural facilities are able to increase awareness of healthcare careers to the youth in North Dakota through programs such as the Scrubs Camp, and HOSA. Having been a judge at the state HOSA competition, I can tell you we have some amazing youth in our state, and we must do all that we can to help them succeed and return to our workforce. Healthcare facilities across the state benefit from AHEC's ability to educate middle and high school aged students

on the potential careers in healthcare, assisting students in finding internships while in college, and guiding them in their potential careers post-graduation. HB1142 provided for \$250,000 in funding for AHEC, and I would encourage this committee to at a minimum maintain this funding request. The success of hospitals and health centers in recruiting the workforce of the future will require partnerships with outside entities to leverage their expertise. Through partnerships and with the assistance of organizations like AHEC we can continue the effort to rebuild our workforce.

Post-pandemic we have another crisis looming in workforce shortages. We have seen retirements and career changes, and they are happening faster than we can replace them. Relying on temporary and travel staff is not financially viable long-term for rural facilities. Make no mistake about it, our healthcare system is going to need support itself coming out of this pandemic. The impact that the pandemic has had on the mental health of our workers is unknown at this time, but I believe it to be significant.

With concentrated efforts to replenish the workforce, increasing protection of healthcare workers, and continued development of workforce programs, I am confident that we can succeed. Looking forward I see the importance of programs such as AHEC becoming even more significant in the overall success of our rural healthcare system.

Thank you again for your time this morning, your support of rural healthcare related programs, and the important work that you all do on behalf of the citizens of North Dakota.

Respectfully Submitted,

Matthew Shahan, CEO  
WRHS, WRHSF, WHLC