



## North Dakota Veterinary Medical Association

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### **Testimony of Bleaux Johnson, DVM**

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### **In Support of HB 1004**

January 19, 2023

Chairman Nelson and Members of the Committee,

I am a mixed animal rural practitioner in Hettinger, N.D. and am a board member of the North Dakota Veterinary Medical Association (NDVMA). I am here today on behalf of the NDVMA to voice our support of HB 1004, specifically as it relates to the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program (VLRP).

I was a 2008 recipient of the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program and completed my four-year contract. I would like to thank you for the valuable program, explain the opportunities it created for me and my family, and provide general information on the need for the program.

The Veterinary Loan Repayment Program was a major deciding factor for me coming back to North Dakota for employment. I had the opportunity to visit with a few clinics in Montana and ultimately decided to move to Hettinger, largely because of the opportunity with the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program. The salary opportunities were very similar between all the clinics I considered, but the biggest difference was having the opportunity to apply for the program. Walking out of veterinary school I had around \$240,000 in student loan debt and a starting salary around \$55,000. This debt-to-income ratio made it very difficult to financially advance myself and my career. Shortly after receiving the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program contract, I purchased my first home and within two years I became a partner at West River Veterinary Clinic, where I continue to practice today. Lastly, I got married three years after working in Hettinger, and we now have five children. This program has given me so much more than just an opportunity to reduce my student loan debt; it gave me the opportunity to have a career, a home, and most of all a family in rural North Dakota.

As an owner of a mixed animal veterinary practice in ND, I have been fortunate enough to hire on four associate veterinarians with three being Veterinary Loan Repayment Program recipients. They continue to practice and live in North Dakota as well. To me, this is such a valuable program for

recruiting and retaining food animal veterinarians in our state, especially considering less than five percent of veterinarians work exclusively in food animal medicine.

Without the program, North Dakota will struggle to find and retain food animal veterinarians. The financial opportunities for veterinarians are much greater in more urban areas that have a large focus on companion animals. This program, with priority on communities with a population less than 5,000, allows food animal practitioners an opportunity to practice medicine and help support our agricultural community while being able to still pay off student loan debts and expand their ability to develop as practice owners and leaders in their rural communities.

North Dakota would lose its new veterinarians to other states and urban communities as the economics, culture and environment of rural practice prove challenging and do not lend to fulfilling loan payments while caring for a family or funding retirement. These veterinarians are responsible, financially conscious, and many want to return to work in rural areas, but the economics are not in their favor. Veterinary education has become tremendously expensive with 84% of recent veterinary medicine students graduating with a mean debt of \$186,430 and 1 out of 3 of those with debt, exceeding \$200,000 or more. Mean starting salaries for food animal veterinarians in 2021 was \$84,000 and the debt-to-income ratio continues to be of serious concern. As in my situation, rural veterinary practices are unable to match salaries required to pay for this level of debt. This makes the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program very important in recruiting veterinarians to the state's rural communities and making rural veterinary careers feasible for them.

The program has been very successful in recruiting large animal veterinarians, as well as retaining them with an overall retention rate of 74 percent after fulfilling the contract. In addition, the program has facilitated the buy-in to a practice or the starting of a practice with nearly 50 percent of those completing their contracts becoming practice owners in North Dakota, like myself. Demand for the program is also significant with usually more than 3 applicants per year.

Food animal veterinarians face significant costs to establish practices and these practices will not be economically viable unless there is community support. Veterinarians are needed to promote public health, protect our food supply, and to serve in rural areas. The food animal industry is vital to the economy of North Dakota. The program helps establish financial stability for veterinarians to serve in rural areas which in turn stimulates rural economies.

I am grateful for being a participant in the Veterinary Loan Repayment Program and strongly encourage you to fund the program at its current level, so North Dakota can continue to support three recipients annually to meet the veterinarian needs in its rural areas.