

March 2023 | Legislative Session | SB 2128

Good afternoon Representative Weisz and Members of the Committee,

I am Heather Strandell, Senior Director of Clinic Operations at Altru Health System, and I am providing testimony in **SUPPORT** of SB 2128. I am here to share Altru's current challenges and future vision for mental health and chemical dependency services.

As a clinical leader, I have been working for Altru for 19 years and overseeing clinic operations for 3 years. In advance of sharing more about Altru and our vision, I want to briefly share my perspective as a clinical leader. The increase in mental health needs and the lack of resources to meet those needs is real. My colleagues and I are now caring for more patients with mental health needs than ever before. We are working right up to and beyond the scope of our care to fill the gap in care due to the increased need for, and the lack of services available. With this in mind, we at Altru are committed to working toward a solution.

Altru's Commitment to Mental Health Services

Altru Health System is the primary healthcare provider for northeast North Dakota. We work closely with the critical access hospitals in our service area to ensure care is provided as close to home as possible. Altru provides behavioral health services to our region, and we are committed to continuing to do so. With that, we acknowledge the urgent need for improved access to these services in our region, and throughout the state. We appreciate your focus on these efforts and your time today.

Barriers & Altru's Vision

Altru's vision for mental health services and chemical dependency treatment is to maintain our long-standing commitment of providing access to high-quality care, close to home. To fulfill that commitment, we must expand our capacity and change the way we care for our patients.

Unfortunately, patients aren't getting the timely care they need. Altru continues to see patients present to the ER with needs that meet the inpatient requirements. We continue to see patients on a weekly basis that get transferred to our medical floor due to alcohol or substance abuse (narcotics, illegal drugs, etc.) that utilize resources from these floors. There are patients under the age of 13 years old that require assistance that we don't currently have the ability to perform (child psychiatrist, programming, etc.).

As we look to the future, Altru aims to be a statewide leader in mental health and chemical dependency treatment.

In partnership with Grand Forks Public Health and collaborating agencies, we seek to explore opportunities to develop a CCBHC within our system to enhance the spectrum of behavioral health care in our community. We believe Altru is best suited to offer these types of services to our community.

The current state of behavioral health means that hospital emergency departments have a particular interest in getting the right service at the right time. EDs end up as a provider of last resort and the CCBHC framework allows hospitals to reduce hospitalizations through proactive care, crisis services and close follow up available - and required - by the CCBHC framework.

Additionally, hospital systems like Altru have more experiencing in scaling operations. We have depth across departments and the ability to align staffing quickly to meet demand. Our system can reach and refer a larger population through our team of healthcare providers.

The behavioral health crisis in North Dakota requires big solutions. Hospital systems have the skill and expertise to meet the needs of the broader community.

Ask

We appreciate your time today, and your continued support of mental health services in our state. Altru seeks to be a strong partner to the state in providing solutions to this growing problem. I'm requesting your support of SB 2128 to allow us to continue down this path of expanding access and enhancing care to patients.

Thank you for your time, we would be happy to take any questions you may have.