

Senate Human Services Committee

SB 2344

February 8, 2023

Chairman Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services Committee:

I wish to provide this written testimony in support of SB 2344 – a bill that would expand the loan repayment program to include public health professionals in the North Dakota program along with other health, dental and behavioral health care professionals.

As a former Director of Grand Forks Public Health, I can attest to the challenges of recruitment and retention of public health professionals in critical fields. Loan repayment programs are essential to achieving positive outcomes in the fields of public health nursing, environmental health and epidemiology. In a recent survey of health department leaders in North Dakota, respondents indicated that a loan repayment program would be beneficial – particularly in rural areas of the state.

Students graduating from undergraduate and graduate programs that prepare them for careers in public health often have significant student loan debt and may choose private sector employment due to lower wages in the public sector. A loan repayment program helps to offset this loss of income and can provide an incentive to employment. At a time when we need to significantly strengthen the public health system in North Dakota, making this investment will ultimately have a positive impact on the health of our residents.

Several similar loan repayment programs are becoming available to strengthen the U.S. public health system. This has become necessary as a result of the stressors placed on personnel during the pandemic and the retirements of experienced public health workers. A program specific to North Dakota would complement this effort and has the potential to benefit local health departments.

The addition of public health professionals to the North Dakota loan repayment program can be effectively administered in concert with the existing program. There are opportunities to create awareness of this beneficial program through the state's health professional and MPH degree granting programs. Further, it can easily be promoted by the public sector organizations that are involved in recruiting and retaining their workforce.

I respectfully urge you to support SB 2344 and this investment in public health.

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