

Testimony of William Patrie to the Senate Workforce Development Committee
Senate Bill 2151 January 26, 2023

Senator Wobbema and members of the Committee on Workforce Development

My name is Bill Patrie. I am grateful for the opportunity to support Senate Bill 2151. I am grateful also for its sponsors who have put their names on the bill. I served as the director of the Economic Development Commission during the administration of George Sinner and as rural development director for the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives. I also served as the executive director of North Central Planning Council in Devils Lake which served Rolette, Towner, Cavalier, Ramsey, Benson and Eddy Counties. My wife is a retired school teacher who works with Dickinson State University supervising practice teachers and I am also retired and involved in a number of non-profit organizations. My wife and I live North of Bismarck and have raised chickens and sold eggs for the last 7 years. We just quit before egg prices went up.

The bill before you today would be the incentive for 55 families to move to North Dakota, and with the help of an organization being formed “Communities Acting together for Change and Hope” (CATCH) and other communities and organization, demonstrate that rural places can again become destinations for people seeking a good place to live, work, and raise their families.

To my knowledge, no other state currently is thinking of workforce development in terms of recruiting families; rather they are thinking of filling jobs. This bill uniquely equips faith-based organizations to work with economic development organizations at the community level to demonstrate this approach to workforce development works.

I would suggest modest amendments to the bill as drafted.

1. Change the name Immigration Workforce Advisory Board to Immigration Workforce Development Board.
2. On line 12 add Federal Agencies to the list of organizations the Board will collaborate with.
3. On line 17 replace “provide” with “contract for” legal services
4. Target the funding in this bill to cities with populations of 10,000 or less
5. Allow the Immigration Development Board to continue to accept applications during the first biennium even if all appropriated funds are committed so the 2025 legislature could understand what demand exists.

SB 2151 shifts some of the responsibility for recruiting workers to North Dakota from State Agencies and private businesses to communities. While it is true that businesses in those communities will be active to recruit employees, the entire community, including churches and schools, want families to come and live there permanently.

The Find the Good Life program through the Department of Commerce is a marketing program for workers. Find the Good Life provides state money to help companies partially cover sign on bonuses, retention bonuses, moving fees and short-term rental costs. The Department of Commerce is contracting with a firm to market its programs. The Bismarck Tribune carried a

story on Tuesday, January 24, 2023 that said 9 people had been attracted to the state since the program was restarted in June of last year.

There is a significant difference between the approach to workforce development envisioned in SB2151 and Find the Good Life. Rather than competing with other states to attract foot loose workers, SB2151 targets families already pushed from their homes and countries because of war, starvation, crime, or persecution. Some of those families may be immigrants and some maybe refugees. They are not likely to be foot loose individuals looking for a better job. They may already be doctors, plumbers, entrepreneurs, translators, teachers, nurses, dairy farmers, grain farmers, beef producers and pork producers and yes, willing manual laborers who know how to work. And they will have kids who quickly assimilate into schools and become homecoming kings and queens. This suggested approach is not naïve, rather, it is the history of North Dakota's rural communities.

Those of us involved in CATCH know that this program is not for every community. The communities we are interested in working with, will have churches and businesses and community residents that will welcome refugees and immigrants. There will be some type of community consensus achieved before any community proceeds to seek families that will use funds proposed in this bill to locate in their town.

The Immigration Development Board will need clear policies on how communities are selected, what the loan proceeds can be used for, how the loan recipients qualify and how the loans are monitored and supported. The Immigration Board makeup proposed in this bill will provide that expertise. It would be my hope that the \$160,000 loans be used for fixed assets that remain in the community even after the initial borrower might leave. Much like the Homestead Act, this program allows immigrants to "prove up" their claim and after 10 years have a real tangible asset on their balance sheet. They win and so does the community.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this proposed bill is the shift from professional recruiters trying to find workers to families helping families. My wife and I have worked with refugee families and have hosted a teenage refugee who finished the last three years of high school while living with us. We helped him get his drivers license, learn to drive a five-speed manual transmission, complete his homework and find work to pay his own way. We did that without a written agreement between his family who moved to Louisville, Kentucky and us. He is now in Arizona going to college. If SB 2151 had been in place, I think it likely that his family would still be working in North Dakota and Eric would be in a North Dakota college.

I want to point out that should this Legislature pass this bill, using the only state-owned bank in the country to finance refugees and immigrants, you are likely to receive national attention. No other state can do what you are proposing to do. The Bank of North Dakota financed part of my college education. I paid back the principal and interest on that loan a long time ago. But I continue to return positive dividends for the State that bet on me to succeed. Investing in people who want to live in this state is the highest form of workforce development.

Thank you again for this opportunity and I will be glad to answer questions.