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Testimony of Megan Langley 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 Megan Langley, and I am writing in support of Senate Bill 2151. I have worked across North Dakota, specializing in economic and community development with rural and remote communities, for nearly 10 years. As many of you know and live daily, workforce is a challenge for our small towns. North Dakota has over 320 communities, all originally built with substantial infrastructure, and many without the tax base to support it.

Since ND's statehood, it has been susceptible to population booms, due both to the original homesteading movement of the late 1800s, as well as the boom and bust economies of the oil and gas industry; however, since the early 2000s, ND's population has been on a quick and steady decline due to the loss of small family farms and long-standing outmigration of young people, creating the "Great Brain Drain of the Plains". This confluence of circumstances have led to drastic disparities in the quality of life and health outcomes of not only North Dakota's rural residents, but also its residents living in persistent poverty and within Tribal communities.

While North Dakota has made significant population gains over the last decade, partially because of the expanding energy sector and emerging tech sector of the i29 corridor, of nearly 100,000 residents, more newcomers are needed, especially in rural and remote spaces. Since 2013, North Dakota's rural communities have lost over 20% of their grocery stores and an increasing number of the remaining grocery stores are converting to nonprofit models in order to survive. Of North Dakota's counties, 38 of 53 are designated as frontier, meaning they have seven or less persons per square mile (US Census, 2018). In these remote areas, people are often categorized as living in a food desert. A rural food desert is an area where people must drive 10 miles or more to access a full-service grocery store (USDA). Further, individuals residing in North Dakota's food deserts often exhibit a higher incidence of obesity and diabetes, among a decreased ability to easily access medical facilities or services. Of North Dakota's 53 counties, 36 are fully classified as medically underserved areas; 13 are partially medically underserved areas; 2 are fully medically underserved populations; and 2 are adequately served.

SB 2151, along with the wraparound services provided by economic developers and community-based services, could mitigate the trend of growing rural disparities by innovating around North Dakota's pockets of opportunities. Without dollars and

legislation to draw newcomers to rural North Dakota, it may be difficult for existing rural community residents to support infrastructure and cultivate leadership.

It is my understanding that SB 2151 would incentivize 55 families to move to North Dakota and demonstrate that rural places are destinations for people seeking a good place to live, work, and raise their families. This bill could shepherd rural North Dakota into a new era of progress, including building toward equitable economic prosperity.

It is my understanding that several amendments to the bill have been proposed by William Patrie, including:

1. Changing the name *Immigration Workforce Advisory Board* to *Immigration Workforce Development Board*.
2. Adding Federal Agencies (line 12) to the list of organizations the Board will collaborate with.
3. Replacing “provide” with “contract for” legal services (line 17).
4. Targeting the funding in this bill to cities with populations of 10,000 or less.
5. Allowing 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.

I am supportive of the amendments being proposed.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share my testimony.