



164 WEST 13 STREET  
GRAFTON, ND 58237

Testimony of Matthew S. Viscito, M.D. in support of HB 1548  
To the House Human Services Committee  
Tuesday, January 28, 2025

Representative Ruby and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Dr. Matthew Viscito.

I am a family physician and serve as Chief Medical Officer of Unity Medical Center in Grafton, North Dakota. I am Board Certified in Family Medicine and am a Fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians. I was awarded the North Dakota Family Physician of the Year in 2022. I am also an Associate Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine for the University of North Dakota School of Medicine.

I support House Bill 1548. There is a well-established connection between physical health, mental health and general wellness. A search on Pubmed of the terms “exercise” and “wellbeing” yields a staggering 13,251 results of published scientific papers. A cursory review of the first page of results demonstrates connections between exercise and benefit in those diagnosed with anxiety & depression, coronary artery disease, fibromyalgia, lung cancer and pulmonary hypertension, in addition to decreasing the risk of falls in the elderly. Of course, there are numerous other conditions from which sufferers will see improved outcomes with exercise including diabetes, emphysema, migraines, osteoporosis, and obesity. Additionally, there is a plethora of data that demonstrates regular exercise is key in primary prevention, meaning to decrease the likelihood of a condition before it has developed – these conditions include hypertension, heart attack, stroke and diabetes.

I spend a large portion of my time each week educating patients about these benefits of exercise and helping them break down barriers to maintain a program of regular physical activity. One consistent theme is lack of access to a safe exercise environment. While the summer months allow for walking, biking and other outdoor activities, our harsh northern climate limits those activities for many of my patients to six or fewer months each year. The remainder of the year, there is a marked paucity of viable facilities where one can get adequate cardiovascular exercise. Additionally, a frequent recommendation I make is for low impact exercise, particularly for my aging patient population that commonly suffer from arthritis and other joint conditions. Water-based exercise such as swimming and water aerobics can afford these individuals the benefits of cardiovascular exercise while limiting the stress and strain on joints such as knees and hips.

Beyond the benefits on physical conditions, also well established are the improvements in mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression with regular physical activity. For numerous reasons, the need for increased focus on mental health in our country has been a frequent topic in the media in recent years. Further, there is a growing trend for pharmaceutical treatments to be looked down upon, particularly when wellness-based behaviors could be an equal, if not better option. I cannot say I disagree as many medications for anxiety and depression are imperfect, having significant side effect risk and often less than ideal effect. Meanwhile, there are no ill effects from regular safe exercise while the benefits are astounding.

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I sincerely hope you will support HB 1548. Offering our regional population a place to commune and pursue their wellness would be a huge boon in so many ways. The benefits to individuals would be immediately felt, while the benefits to the community and surrounding areas will be evident for generations.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,

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