

HB 1567

Hearing Date: Monday, January 27, 2025

ND House Human Services Committee

Providing Testimony:

Tammy King, Executive Director

Bridging the Dental Gap

Bismarck ND

Position: In support of HB 1567

Chair Ruby and honorable members of the House Human Service Committee

My name is Tammy King and I am the Executive Director of Bridging the Dental Gap (BDG). I am here in support of House Bill 1567.

I am going to provide you with just a little information on what Bridging the Dental Gap is doing to assist with access to dental care in the state. We also have Federally Qualified Health Centers, the ND Oral Health Coalition, the ND Dental Association, the ND Dental Foundation, Community HealthCare Association of the Dakotas, the ND Dental Board, state agencies, private dental clinics, and others all working together to improve dental care access to the people of North Dakota.

BDG is a non-profit stand-alone dental clinic located in Bismarck ND. BDG is not a free clinic and does not receive any state or federal funding. All funding comes from the revenue received from insurance reimbursement and payments from patients along with funding raised from grants and fundraising events. All staff are paid, and we do not have any volunteer dentists.

The clinic was established 21 years ago. The mission of BDG is to improve access to dental care for those receiving ND Medicaid benefits, those who are uninsured and under-insured and for low-income members of the community. What started out as a clinic providing dental services to people living within a 50-mile radius from Bismarck in 2004 is now providing dental care to people across the entire state of North Dakota. Individuals without ND Medicaid or other dental insurance can qualify for a sliding scale discount based on their income and family size. BDG provides dental care in an 8-operatorial clinic as well as outreach to long-term care facilities in Bismarck.

Currently, there is a huge shortage of dentists in the state who are accepting new patients with ND Medicaid. As of January 1, 2025, BDG has patients in every county in the state of North Dakota, with the exception of four counties. We have multiple people calling daily saying they have been calling dentists around the state and BDG is the only dental clinic accepting new Medicaid patients. In the past we were always fortunate to have pediatric dentists in the Bismarck-Mandan area accept our referrals. In the past year we found that that was no longer the case, and they were no longer accepting new

Medicaid patients. We were extremely fortunate to be able to add a part-time pediatric dentist to our staff so we are able to provide some dental care to children now.

Fifty-five percent of BDG patients receive ND Medicaid and 15% receive some other form of insurance which is mostly Medicare supplemental insurances. The remaining 30% of patients are at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines and qualify for a sliding fee scale discount. Our patients consist of people of all ages, from all walks of life, with various degrees of limitations and barriers and for almost all, no place else to go for dental care.

BDG provides clinical rotations for fourth year dental students through Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Rotations are scheduled for a two-week time period and usually consist of 2 students at a time. Hosting these students has allowed us to see additional patients while they are here and for the students to learn and experience the area of public health. In addition to these benefits, BDG uses the opportunity as a recruitment tool to educate each student about employment opportunities, state loan repayment programs, the benefits of Bismarck-Mandan and the entire state of North Dakota. These dental students are responsible for paying for their own housing while they complete their rotations. BDG has been fortunate to receive some funding through the State Oral Health Program to cover housing costs for students, but this funding is not guaranteed in the future. Most of the time, paying for housing is what brings the students to our clinic. We are working with the University of Minnesota to possibly start additional dental student rotations in the fall of 2025. Without funding, it would be very difficult for BDG to cover these housing costs or to expand this program.

In addition to providing rotations for dental students, BDG is committed to host high school and college students for job shadowing and volunteering opportunities. BDG has a history of training our own dental assistants and have had several who have completed the required hours at the clinic and pass their qualifications to become a Qualified Dental Assistant as well as Registered Dental Assistants.

I am one of five other team members who are involved in a yearly trip for the purpose of recruiting fourth year dental students to work in North Dakota. We travel to the University of Minnesota, the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and Creighton University in Omaha to provide them with information regarding the employment opportunities, loan repayment options and other information about the benefits of working and living in North Dakota.

While we are doing many good things in the state to help provide access to dental care, I feel we are just touching the surface. This proposed study is very essential to discovering how much more can be done and what should be addressed to increase access to dental care in the state of North Dakota, which is why I fully support HB 1567.

Thank you for your time.