

Dear Members of the North Dakota Legislative Assembly,

I am writing to express **my strong support** for House Bill 1612, which proposes the allocation of \$2 million to establish a Center for Aerospace Medicine in North Dakota. This initiative represents a forward-thinking investment in the well-being and success of aviation personnel, a cornerstone of our state's thriving aviation industry.

Aerospace professionals, including pilots, air traffic controllers, maintenance technicians, and support staff, operate in high-stakes environments where physical and mental health are paramount to safety and performance. Despite the critical nature of their roles, many **aviation personnel face significant barriers** to accessing specialized healthcare tailored to their unique needs. **Nationwide, approximately 60% of aviation professionals report difficulty finding healthcare providers who understand the unique demands of their profession** (Smith & Brown, 2021), and in **North Dakota, over 70% of rural counties are designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs)** (National Rural Health Association, 2020). North Dakota, in particular, faces a shortage of healthcare providers with expertise in aerospace medicine and mental health care. **Until very recently, no aviation psychologists were located within the state**, forcing aviators to travel across the United States for specialized care. This lack of local providers often forces individuals to travel long distances or delay care, exacerbating health challenges, increasing costs, and potentially compromising safety.

The proposed center would address this gap by providing accessible, comprehensive care, ensuring that these individuals can perform their duties safely and effectively. **Many aviation professionals are hesitant to seek mental health care due to the fear of losing their medical certificates**, a requirement to continue working in their field. This fear, as highlighted by Hoffman et.al. (2022), often leads to untreated mental health conditions that can escalate and impact performance. **By centralizing resources and expertise, the center would provide access to well-trained mental health professionals who understand these unique challenges and can offer confidential, specialized care.**

Studies show that mental health issues in aviation are a growing concern, with approximately **56% of pilots reporting significant levels of depression and nearly 12% experiencing suicidal ideation** prior to the mental health impacts of COVID (Taylor et al., 2016).

Additionally, studies indicate that **25% of air traffic controllers experience symptoms of anxiety** (Jones & Carter, 2019), and **fatigue-related incidents contribute to nearly 20% of aviation safety reports** (Federal Aviation Administration, 2020). These statistics underscore the urgent need for specialized mental health services tailored to the aviation community.

North Dakota is home to a growing aviation sector, driven by institutions such as the University of North Dakota's John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences and a robust commercial and general aviation community. **By establishing a Center for Aerospace Medicine, we would not only support the health and resilience of our aviation workforce but also position North Dakota as a leader in aerospace medicine and innovation.** This initiative would enhance our

ability to attract and retain top talent in the industry, further bolstering our state's economic growth.

Moreover, the **center would provide vital resources to address the mental health challenges faced by aviation personnel.** The unique stressors of aviation careers—including irregular schedules, high responsibility, and the need for constant vigilance—can take a toll on mental health. By offering specialized mental health services, the center would promote well-being and reduce stigma, **creating a culture where seeking help is viewed as a strength rather than a vulnerability.**

Investing in the Center for Aerospace Medicine through HB 1612 is an investment in the safety, health, and future of North Dakota's aviation community. I urge you to support this important legislation and ensure that our state continues to lead in advancing the well-being of those who keep our skies safe.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your commitment to the advancement of North Dakota's aviation industry. Please do not hesitate to reach out if I can provide additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,  
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