

Testimony

Elizabeth Bjerke, Ph.D., Associate Dean, John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences,
University of North Dakota

January 27, 2025

In support of North Dakota House Bill 1612

Dear Chair Ruby and Members of the House Human Services Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Bjerke, and I serve as the Associate Dean in the College of Aerospace and Professor of Aviation at the University of North Dakota. I am here today to testify in support for HB 1612.

Unique Barriers Pilots Face Seeking Healthcare

Pilots in the United States, both on the recreational and commercial side of the industry, are required to hold a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) medical certificate to operate an aircraft. These aviation medical certificates can only be issued by FAA designated Aviation Medical Examiners. Depending on their level of pilot certification and age, pilots may need to 'pass' this medical exam as frequently as every 6-months. If a pilot does not 'pass' the medical exam they are unable to pilot an aircraft.

This regulatory medical certification is unique to the aviation industry, and for most pilots not only is flying their livelihood, it is also their identity.

For example, looking around this room, most non-pilots in the room if suffering from anxiety, depression or substance abuse challenges could see their primary care provider or therapist without any ramification to their careers or livelihood. This is not the case for pilots. If a pilot is suffering from a mental health illness the barriers to seeking help are extremely high. **Fear** of losing their medical certificate in turn means they are no longer able to fly. Which also means they may no longer be able to **financially support** their family. Even if a pilot makes a healthy decision to seek help for anxiety or depression, the **FAA Medical Certification process** is complex. It will require seeing a specialized Aviation Medical Examiner called a Human Intervention Motivational Study (HIMS AME), then if medication is prescribed the pilot will need to stay on a stabilized dose for at least six-months before they can even begin the lengthy process for a special issuance aviation medical certificate. Pilots simply do not **trust** this process; thus, often do not seek the care they need. Additionally, the **access** to the specialized FAA designated HIMS Aviation Medical Examiner is very limited, especially in a rural state like North Dakota. All of these barriers combined leads to a dangerous culture of pilots not seeking the health care they need to thrive.

Attached to this testimony is an image found in a recent FAA Aviation Rulemaking Committee's final report in regards to Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances that was released on April 1, 2024. This image attempts to depict the current aeromedical process and barriers pilots face. It illustrates the complexity of the issue with no real guidance for solutions. North Dakota has a strong aviation community with nearly 5,000 pilots, making us the 2nd leading state of pilots per capita who will likely at some point in their flying careers experience a physical or mental health issue that will need guidance by experts to navigate the FAA aeromedical process.

Aviation Mental Health at UND

Concern for the mental health of our aviation students at UND was amplified during the COVID pandemic, while the whole world was suffering through this major event, it was evident that our aviation students didn't feel like they could seek help due to the fear of losing their FAA aviation medical certificates. During the Spring of 2021, we brought together a group of experts from across our campus to discuss aviation mental health and think of ways we could help our aviation student population. Then in the Fall of 2021 tragedy struck our program, the death of John Hauser made us realize that we needed to engage outside of our university if we were going to make significant change. In December of 2021, UND hosted the first Aviation Mental Health Summit. We brought together other collegiate aviation programs, airline partners, mental health professionals and most importantly the FAA. We spent a whole day in discussions and collaborations, with tangible takeaways. We have continued to support an annual Aviation Mental Health Symposium bringing together experts from around the country.

One of the takeaways from these focused discussions was the need to invest in an infrastructure to build our expertise in a network of support for our students. In early 2023, UND showed support for this initiative by granting Strategic Investment funds of over \$600,000 to start building an aerospace medicine network that would increase access to care for our students.

Resources Established at UND

UND's Student Health Services has a long history in providing FAA Aviation Medical Certification dating back to 1970, essentially the same timeframe as when the aviation program was established at UND. Today, UND's Student Health Services employs three FAA Aviation Medical Examiners and conducts nearly 1,000 aviation medicals a year. Through the strategic investment funds, we have been able to support an AME in getting their FAA HIMS certification, meaning that this individual is now able to help pilots needing to navigate the FAA medical process for mental health and substance abuse issues. We have also been able to train additional clinical support staff to assist with FAA paperwork required as part of the special issuance process. The UND Counseling Center on campus was able to hire and embed a full-time aviation psychologist to work directly with the College of Aerospace to provide therapy and outreach to our students. We have also supported three psychologists in also getting their HIMS designations so that they can provide the needed assessments and evaluations for pilots that are required for the FAA

medical certification process. All of these resources are in place to help break down the barriers for our aviation students at UND.

In closing

Now that we have invested in the needed resources at UND to serve our aviation student population, I believe that we are well positioned to also assist the nearly 5,000 pilots across the state of North Dakota. We are eager to work with the North Dakota Aviation Association, North Dakota Aeronautics Commission, North Dakota Medical Association and North Dakota Psychological Association to help educate and provide support. By establishing the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine, we would be able to create a statewide network by leveraging the expertise established at UND. I strongly support a 'Do Pass' vote on HB 1612.

References:

[https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/Mental Health ARC Final Report RELEASED.pdf](https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/Mental_Health_ARC_Final_Report_RELEASED.pdf)

<https://aero.nd.gov/studies/aviation-statistics/>

<https://designee.faa.gov/designeeLocator>

https://www.faa.gov/pilots/medical_certification/media/hims-ames.pdf

<https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statement-mental-health-and-aviation-medical-clearances-rulemaking-committee>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11302551/#:~:text=The%20analysis%20of%20literature%20sources,jobs%20%5B6%2C7%5D>

<https://www.npr.org/2023/12/06/1217591486/pilots-mental-health-treatment-lose-license-ntsb->

[faa#:~:text=Pilot%20Troy%20Merritt%20says%20he,that%20system%2C%22%20Merritt%20said](https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/faq-statement-mental-health-and-aviation-medical-clearances-rulemaking-committee#:~:text=Pilot%20Troy%20Merritt%20says%20he,that%20system%2C%22%20Merritt%20said)

.

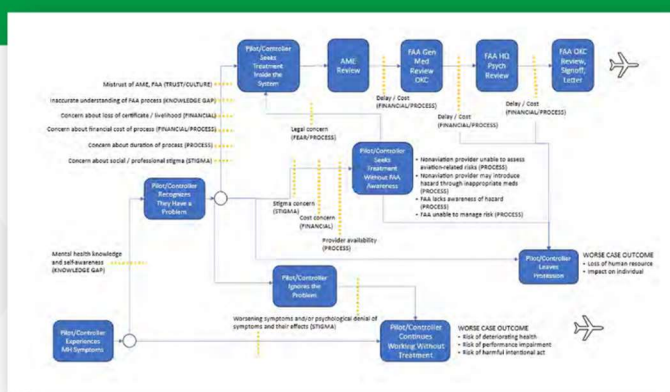


North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine

Testimony in Support of HB 1612

Unique Barriers Pilots Face Seeking Healthcare

- Fear
- Trust
- Stigma
- FAA Aeromedical Process
- Lack of access to specialized care
- Financial concerns
- Culture



*FAA ARC Final Report – Mental Health & Aviation Medical Clearances (April 1, 2024)



Aviation Mental Health at UND



UND LEARNING
EQUITY
AFFINITY
DISCOVERY
SERVICE

- Concern for the mental well-being of our students was amplified during the COVID Pandemic
 - What started as an internal discussion turned external following John Hauser's passing
 - Hosted first Aviation Mental Health Summit in December 2021
 - Brought together collegiate aviation programs, airlines and the FAA
 - UND plays pivotal role in hosting this annual summit focused on aviation mental health
 - Strong stigma surrounding mental health and aviation coupled with lack of access to services and knowledge of navigating the FAA complex process
- UND Internal Support – UND Strategic Investment Funds
 - In order to grow the concept at UND we were successful in receiving institutional strategic investment funds in 2023 (FY24/FY25)



Resources Established at UND

- UND Student Health Services
 - Long history in providing FAA aviation medicals to pilots and air traffic controllers
 - 3 Aviation Medical Examiners (AME) conducting nearly 1000 aviation medicals a year
- UND Counseling Center
 - Long history of providing mental health related resources for UND students
- UND John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences
 - Nearly 1,900 flight students on campus in a given year needing to navigate the aviation medical process
- UND School of Medicine and Health Science – focuses on rural health

- UND Strategic Investment Funds and John Hauser Memorial Fund supported:
 - Obtained additional FAA certification to support mental health and substance abuse cases
 - Referred to as HIMS designation for both AMEs (1) and psychologists (3)
 - Need this expertise/designation to work with pilots navigating the FAA process for mental health related issues
 - Ability to hire more support staff to assist with the complex FAA paperwork process
 - Hired an embedded aviation psychologist for the aviation program

