

Chairperson Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee,

My name is Scott Brown, and I am an orthopedic board-certified physical therapist with over 17 years of experience. I currently serve as the director of rehabilitation and therapy at a large healthcare organization in North Dakota. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 2273.

Since the successful implementation of legislation in 2021 allowing physical therapists to order X-rays, we have seen significant improvements in patient care and efficiency within my organization. However, currently physical therapists cannot order other imaging types that benefit patients being evaluated by physical therapist.

Patient Case Example: Imagine a patient from Devil's Lake, ND, who traveled over two hours to be evaluated for severe spine pain. Upon arrival, he was seen first by a physical therapist who immediately identified signs of significant nerve involvement. Recognizing the urgency, the physical therapist swiftly referred for diagnostic imaging and coordinated with other healthcare providers, leading to an MRI being performed the same day. The results confirmed the need for immediate surgical intervention, and a neurosurgeon performed the necessary surgery the next day. This timely intervention by the physical therapists not only relieved the patient's pain but also potentially prevented long-term nerve damage. With our current practice act, the PT could not maximize his clinical decision-making with a direct referral for diagnostic imaging.

Support for SB 2273:

- **Provider Shortages and Rising Healthcare Costs:** Our nation's healthcare system is under duress, particularly in rural areas where provider shortages are acute. Allowing physical therapists to order advanced imaging can alleviate some of these pressures by reducing the need for multiple appointments and referrals, thus lowering overall healthcare costs.
- **Access Challenges:** Patients in rural areas often face significant barriers to accessing emergency rooms, walk-in clinics, and specialists. By empowering physical therapists to order necessary imaging, we can improve patient access to timely and appropriate care, reducing the burden on other healthcare facilities.
- **Safety and Appropriateness:** Studies have shown that physical therapists can safely and effectively order imaging. For example, in a clinical setting, 91% of images ordered by physical therapists were deemed appropriate by board-certified radiologists. Additionally, there were no reports of mismanagement, litigation, or revocation of licenses among physical therapists who had direct access to imaging. Within our organization, there have been no safety events reported nor patient complaints regarding physical therapists ordering imaging.
- **Current Utilization:** The utilization of imaging by physical therapists has been appropriate and not overutilized. For instance, data collected from my organization's spine clinic, only 2% of visits with physical therapists resulted in imaging orders, demonstrating responsible use of this capability. Other types of images follow similar low utilization rates in nationally published data.

- **Delays in Larger Health Systems:** Even in larger, integrated health systems, necessary tests can be delayed due to communication issues and busy providers. Currently, if an MRI is needed, the physical therapist must contact a physician, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner to order the image as a formality, which delays care. Allowing physical therapists to order imaging directly would streamline the process and improve patient outcomes.

Conclusion: Given the ongoing access challenges and the potential for these issues to worsen, now is the time to act. Supporting this legislation will improve patient access, enhance patient satisfaction, and reduce healthcare costs. It is a necessary step to ensure that the residents of North Dakota receive the medical care they need and deserve.

Thank you for considering this important legislation and for your service. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with questions.