

**TESTIMONY OF  
BEN GATES  
EMERGENCY MANAGER  
STEELE COUNTY  
BEFORE THE 69<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATIVE SESSION  
SENATE STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE  
FEBRUARY 7, 2025  
IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 2332**

Chairman Roers, Vice Chair Castaneda and members of the Committee. My name is Ben Gates and I'm the Director of Emergency Management in Steele County. In addition to my full-time duties in Steele County, I am also the Assistant Emergency Manager in Traill County, and I am the current President of the North Dakota Emergency Management Association (NDEMA). I have also had the pleasure of serving my home and work communities as an active Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). I come to you today to testify in support of SB 2332.

I would like to thank Senator Boschee for reaching out to myself and many others about the possibility of a bill like this. Our discussions centered around the idea of approving funding towards our primarily rural jurisdictions with the intent of recruiting and retaining qualified personnel in those first responder communities. The bill seeks to provide funding in a grant style format to address this issue and many others. There have been horror stories coming out across the State about emergency services being unable to respond to 911 calls because they don't have the staff, the distance is too far, or their equipment has failed. We have aged emergency services throughout the State – both in actual age and in equipment age and our rural agencies don't have the capacity to handle the needed upgrades.

Both Traill County and Steele County have been subject to a decline in volunteer responders throughout our emergency services network. Steele County alone plays host to three (3) fire departments (Sharon Fire Department, Finley Fire Department, and Hope Fire Department) and 1.5 EMS services (Hope Ambulance covering the southern half of the County, and West Traill Ambulance Service that comes from Mayville to cover the northern half of the County).

Sharon Fire Department is closing with the final paperwork to be submitted to the State Fire Marshall's Office by the end of March 2025. With this closure, the City of Sharon and the surrounding Townships are now going to have to rely on the services of Finley Fire

Department. Although Finley Fire Department is only 9 miles away from the City of Sharon, the effects of this closure are widespread. As another department closes, some other department must pick up the coverage area, fire district and other emergency services lines must be redrawn, and the citizens of the City of Sharon and the surrounding Townships no longer have that immediate reaction and response in the event of an emergency. The department closing is a direct result of the lack of volunteers.

Both the Finley Fire Department and Hope Fire Department have also felt the impact of low volunteer numbers. We have members in each of those departments that have been part of the department for over 50 years. We are lacking in the younger generation. Active members of each department are around 10 per department with the average years of service of those departments around 15 years. This means that our older generation are still part of the volunteer community, and we are not supplementing this generation with the younger generation as is needed to maintain the departments.

In addition to the fire departments, we are running into the same problems with our emergency medical services (EMS). This problem is exaggerated that in order to provide patient care, an individual must be an Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), an Advanced Emergency Medical Technician (AEMT), or a Paramedic. Each of these certifications require a minimum number of hours of training and education along with ride-along style trainings to ensure that the new medical provider is competent in their certification. Now the certification needs for each level of medical provider is not the purview of this bill; however, it takes some time to obtain any of these certification levels. EMR is approximately 4-6 months of additional training, EMT and AEMT are 6-10 months, and a Paramedic certification is at least 12-18 months. It is a major time commitment to be part of the EMS community and its no wonder that more people aren't willing to take these courses. Most EMS agencies do not have the resources to send any interested member to the proper training and education needed for any type of certification. NDHHS has done a good job of securing funding to help offset some of these courses with a reimbursement grant for agencies that are sending their people to these trainings; however, once these people come back to serve their communities, a lot of them are doing it for no pay at all.

Law enforcement is a large piece of the public safety community. As a previous Alderman for the City of Mayville, I know firsthand the funding needs to be able to provide law enforcement services within the City. About 15 years ago, the City of Mayville made the decision to move law enforcement services to the County. With this move came an obvious funding discussion. In the last 5 years alone, the City of Mayville has spent \$1,137,094 on law enforcement services, broken down below by year:

- 2020 - \$201,532 – 51% of the City's general fund budget
- 2021 - \$203,781- 48% of the City's general fund budget
- 2022 - \$256,391 – 56% of the City's general fund budget
- 2023 - \$184,210 – 50% of the City's general fund budget
- 2024 - \$291,180 – 57% of the City's general fund budget

Law enforcement is needed, and the expenses associated with this are warranted. The City of Mayville holds exactly 18% of the Traill County Sheriff's Office total budget. With this funding, we receive at least 1, usually 2 deputies that live within the City, and the commitment from the Sheriff's Office that a deputy will be patrolling the City every night.

The funding is an important and necessary piece of this legislation, as it is in most pieces of legislation. I believe there is room for negotiation for the funding needs, both along the lines of additional funding and the reduction of the funding request. If approved, grants can be awarded to communities like the City of Sharon to keep their fire department operating to properly serve their community. Grants could go to EMS agencies like the Hope Ambulance Service to send their people to EMR, EMT, AEMT, or Paramedic courses and pay them some type of stipend when they return from these courses to help offset their time commitment. Grants could go to places like the City of Mayville to help offset property tax increases to maintain law enforcement services in the City.

I will end with one final note – we in the rural emergency services world need your help and attention. We need your help to ensure that our emergency services continue to withstand the test of time. I look forward to working with you on this bill and any amendments that may arise. Thank you for your time today, any questions can be directed to me at the information below.



Ben Gates  
Director, Emergency Management  
Steele County  
Cell: 701-270-1738  
Email: [bgates@nd.gov](mailto:bgates@nd.gov)