



House Human Services Committee
SB 2231
Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Chairman Ruby, Vice Chair Frelich and honorable members of the House Human Services, my name is Nadine Boe and I am CEO of Northland Health Centers. I'm here today in support of SB 2231 to add medically necessary dental treatment for adults on Medicaid Expansion.

Northland Health Centers serves eight communities in the central and northern areas of the state, including Bismarck, Turtle Lake, McClusky, Minot, Rolette, St. John, Bowbells, and Ray. We offer dental care in Turtle Lake, Minot, and soon, Ray. We provide medical, dental and behavioral health services to all community residents, regardless of insurance status and ability to pay. In 2023, we served 6,175 patients with 17,329 total visits. About one quarter of our patients are covered by Medicaid. Of the remainder, about 13 percent are covered by Medicare, which does not have dental coverage included, and 30 percent are uninsured. 32 percent of our patients have private health coverage.

For many Medicaid and non-covered recipients, access to dental care is nearly impossible. In North Dakota and across the country, we see people forced to choose between paying rent, putting food on the table, or getting a painful tooth treated. The result? They delay care until it becomes an emergency. Instead of a simple filling, they end up in the emergency room—where they can't get the treatment they truly need, only temporary pain relief and a referral they often can't afford to follow up on. In my own work at Northland, we see firsthand how this lack of coverage impacts real people—parents who can't work because of an untreated infection, seniors who can't eat properly due to missing teeth, and young adults starting their careers already facing major dental problems they can't afford to fix.

My journey with dental care began long before I ever stepped into leadership. My first career was as a dental assistant, and I remember those early days so vividly watching the relief on a

patient's face when they were finally out of pain, seeing how a simple procedure could change the way someone felt about themselves. I knew then that dental care wasn't just about fixing teeth. It was about restoring dignity, confidence, and quality of life.

Years later, now leading a community health center, I carry those stories with me. They remind me why we do this work, why we fight to keep these services available, and why access to dental care shouldn't be determined by someone's income.

In some parts of North Dakota, access to dental care is nearly nonexistent. That was the case in Ray, where no providers were accepting Medicaid, and families had nowhere to turn for care. We knew something had to be done.

Working with a dedicated group of stakeholders across the state, we took on the challenge of developing an Urgent Care-style dental clinic in Ray—one that could provide immediate relief for patients in pain and reduce the number of unnecessary emergency room visits. It was a long and complex process, but the need was undeniable.

This wasn't just about adding another clinic. It was about creating a model that could be replicated in other underserved areas, proving that with the right partnerships and determination, we can bring dental care to the communities that need it most.

At Northland Health Centers, we are committed to ensuring that essential dental care remains available to those who need it most. Despite persistent workforce shortages, we have worked tirelessly to maintain and expand services, including the urgent care-style dental clinic in Ray. This clinic stands as a testament to what can be accomplished when communities come together to address healthcare gaps. However, without sustainable Medicaid reimbursement, efforts like these will face ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining providers, ultimately limiting access for those who rely on them.

Dental care is not a luxury—it is a fundamental part of healthcare. It impacts how we eat, how we speak, and how we engage with the world. Yet, for far too many, it remains inaccessible. It is time to change that.

We can change that. By making dental care more accessible, we're not just treating problems—we're preventing them. We're giving people the opportunity to live without pain, to pursue their goals with confidence, and to take care of their families without sacrificing their own health.

Adding a comprehensive dental benefit to Medicaid expansion is the fiscally responsible thing to do. Preventative dental care is far more cost-effective than waiting until problems escalate into emergencies. Every dollar invested in preventive oral health services can save several dollars in avoided emergency room visits and complicated medical treatments.

States that have expanded dental benefits under Medicaid have seen improved health outcomes and reduced long-term health costs. When people have access to routine dental care, they stay healthier, they miss fewer days of work, and they avoid costly emergency interventions.

We have the opportunity to make a real, lasting impact by ensuring that dental care is included in Medicaid expansion. Let's invest in preventive care, let's reduce avoidable medical costs, and most importantly, let's give people the dignity of a healthy smile and a pain-free life.