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The Honorable Members of the North Dakota Legislature
State Capitol
600 East Boulevard Avenue #160
Bismarck, ND 58505

Dear Chair Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services,

I am writing to discuss the need for North Dakota to establish a Center for Aerospace Medicine at the University of North Dakota (UND). As envisioned, this would be a broad collaborative project between the UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS), UND Student Health Services, John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences, College of Engineering and Mines's Aerospace Engineering program, and the Department of Psychology. As we continue to advance the fields of health and medicine in our state, this project presents a unique and vital opportunity to integrate aerospace medicine into SMHS's curriculum, expand support services to our aviation community, and tackle the growing concern of mental health in aviation.

North Dakota has long been a leader in pioneering solutions for the unique health challenges faced by rural and underserved populations. Our institution is poised to be a valuable partner in this initiative, as we bring our expertise in rural health and behavioral medicine to bear on the critical needs of the aerospace community. With the establishment of the proposed Center for Aerospace Medicine, we will enhance the training and resources available to medical practitioners in our state, ensuring they are well-versed in aviation regulatory medicine. This specialized training is essential not only for maintaining aviation safety but also for addressing the unique medical needs of pilots and other aviation professionals across the state

Of particular concern is the growing issue of mental health challenges among pilots. High rates of mental illness, including depression and anxiety, are prevalent in the aviation industry. There are specific challenges that pilots face that can contribute to mental health issues, including long hours, time away from family, irregular sleep patterns, and the high-stress environment of aviation. However, a significant barrier to addressing these challenges is the stigma that exists around seeking mental health support. Many pilots fear that disclosing mental health concerns will jeopardize their careers, and this can lead to a dangerous reluctance to seek help. This initiative would help us to break down these barriers and promote a culture of mental wellness in aviation, offering pilots and aviation professionals a safe and confidential space to seek the help they need.

A key component of this initiative is the introduction of an elective 4th-year rotation in aerospace medicine through the medical program, which will offer our medical students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in this highly specialized field. By developing this rotation, we can create a pipeline of physicians who are well-equipped to serve the

growing needs of the aerospace industry, both in North Dakota and beyond. This expansion will ensure that our state remains at the forefront of training physicians capable of addressing aviation-related health challenges.

In addition, the integration of the proposed Center for Aerospace Medicine will allow us to leverage our existing clinical infrastructure across North Dakota, providing aviation medical certification services, outreach programs, and critical care support in a region that includes many rural and remote communities. By utilizing our established network, we can ensure that a rural network is developed so that individuals involved in aviation have access to necessary medical services, regardless of their location. Additionally, our Centers for Family Medicine in Bismarck and Minot provide much needed access to primary health care for the citizens of North Dakota, including mental health services.

Pilots are required to pass a specific medical examination from a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-certified licensed physician, known as an aviation medical examiner (AME), to ensure the physical and mental fit of the pilot. Specialized training and an FAA examination are needed by the licensed physician for this certification. The Centers for Family Medicine may serve as hubs for AME providers to broaden access to this specialized medical care across the state. This also provides a tremendous opportunity to better serve our state and the nation through advocating within the federal regulatory environment for physician assistants and nurse practitioners to be certified to conduct FAA medical examinations and provide further medical certifications to current and future pilots.

The proposed Center for Aerospace Medicine will not only provide essential health services but will also serve as a national model for how to integrate behavioral health into aviation medicine, helping reduce stigma and encouraging pilots to prioritize their mental health. Through UND's top ranked aerospace, aerospace engineering, medical doctor, physician assistant, nursing, psychology, and student support programs, the University is uniquely positioned to support current and future pilots across the state.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marjorie R. Jenkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Dr. Marjorie Jenkins

Dean, School of Medicine and Health Sciences

Vice President for Health Affairs, University of North Dakota