

## TESTIMONY

**Sky Overbo, Licensed Aviation Clinical Psychologist, University of  
North Dakota**

**President Elect of NDPA**

**HB 1612**

**March 18, 2025**

Dear Chair Lee and Members of the Senate Human Services  
Committee:

My name is Dr. Sky Overbo, and I am the Embedded Aviation  
Psychologist at the University of North Dakota. I also am the president-  
elect of the North Dakota Psychological association. **I am here today  
as a licensed psychologist in support of a DO PASS vote for HB1612.**

When most people think about pilots or air traffic controllers, they think  
of commercial airlines and travel. However, in North Dakota aviators are  
not just transporting people to and from our great state but also are  
essential in North Dakota's agricultural success. As of 2023, nearly  
5,000 pilots called North Dakota home. In 2024, the North Dakota  
Aeronautics Commission reported that over 1.2 million revenue-  
generating passengers boarded commercial flights within the state—a  
10% increase from the previous year. Additionally, between July 2023  
and June 2024, North Dakota sold over 25 million gallons of taxable

aviation fuel, and a record-breaking 5.5 million acres of cropland were sprayed using aerial application. These figures highlight just a fraction of the aviation industry's significant impact on North Dakota's economy and infrastructure.

Despite its importance, the aviation profession comes with immense challenges, particularly regarding the stringent and often cumbersome FAA medical certification process. Pilots and air traffic controllers face a complex and intimidating system when dealing with health concerns, whether physical or mental. With North Dakota ranking second in the nation for pilots per capita, many will inevitably experience a health issue requiring expert guidance to navigate this process. By funding the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine, the state has the opportunity to lead the nation in aerospace medicine, offering essential clinical services, education, and research to improve aviation safety and well-being.

### **Unique Barriers Pilots Face Seeking Healthcare**

Pilots in the United States, both recreational and commercial, must hold a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) medical certificate to operate an aircraft. These certificates are issued only by FAA-designated Aviation Medical Examiners (AMEs), and depending on the pilot's certification level and age, they may be required to pass medical exams as frequently as every six months. Failure to meet FAA medical requirements results in the inability to fly, which for many pilots is not just a profession but a core part of their identity.

Unlike most individuals who can seek medical or mental health care without career consequences, pilots face significant barriers. Fear of losing their medical certification deters many from seeking treatment for anxiety, depression, or substance abuse. For example, a pilot diagnosed with anxiety who is prescribed a standard SSRI, such as Zoloft, must first discontinue flying, stabilize on the medication for a minimum of six months, and then undergo a complex FAA review process, which includes multiple psychiatric evaluations and cognitive testing and costs thousands of dollars. This is before even being considered for a special issuance medical certificate.

Pilots seeking mental health care without medication often face confusing and burdensome reporting requirements that many non-aviation mental health professionals are unfamiliar with. A key issue lies in the healthcare system's reliance on diagnostic codes for insurance reimbursement. Unfortunately, if a pilot receives a diagnosis, their therapy must be reported to the FAA—regardless of the circumstances. This means that a pilot seeking grief counseling after the loss of a loved one, simply by using their insurance, could trigger an FAA review that may temporarily ground them, creating a strong disincentive to seek the support they need. These barriers contribute to a dangerous culture where pilots avoid necessary healthcare, risking both personal well-being and flight safety.

Currently, North Dakota has severely limited access to aerospace mental health specialists, making it difficult for pilots to navigate the

FAA's medical certification process, particularly when dealing with mental health concerns. Access to psychologists and psychiatrists with expertise in aerospace medicine is exceedingly rare, and North Dakota faces a broader shortage of mental health providers overall. The state ranks 38th in the nation for mental health care providers per capita, making it even more challenging for pilots to find the specialized care they need. Until last year, North Dakota didn't have a single aviation-certified (HIMS) psychologist. Even now, the only two HIMS psychologists in the state are solely dedicated to serving UND's aviation students, leaving the nearly 5,000 pilots across North Dakota without access to essential mental health services.

If a North Dakota pilot needs psychological testing or treatment from an aviation psychologist, they have no choice but to leave the state. This lack of in-state resources forces pilots to travel hundreds of miles—often at great personal expense and with no guarantee of approval—just to seek the care they need. For many, this burden discourages them from seeking help at all, further deepening the crisis of untreated mental health issues in the aviation community.

The University of North Dakota (UND) already has a strong foundation in aerospace medicine, providing essential services to its students. UND students have access to AME physicians, HIMS AMEs, and aviation psychological assessments. Additionally, UND has the necessary infrastructure to conduct interdisciplinary research and provide aerospace medicine care beyond its campus. However, funding is

essential to extend these services to pilots, air traffic controllers, and aviation professionals across the state. With this appropriation, the Center could hire additional mental health professionals and support training for medical doctors statewide to become AMEs and HIMS AMEs, improving access to critical care.

### Aviation Mental Health at UND

The importance of aviation mental health was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when UND aviation students expressed fear of seeking help due to the potential loss of their FAA medical certificates. In Spring 2021, UND convened a group of experts to address aviation mental health concerns. Tragically, in Fall 2021, the death of John Hauser reinforced the need for broader engagement. In December 2021, UND hosted the first Aviation Mental Health Summit, bringing together collegiate aviation programs, airline partners, mental health professionals, and the FAA to collaborate on solutions. This event has since become an annual Aviation Mental Health Symposium, fostering national discussions and actionable takeaways.

As a result of these efforts, UND invested over \$600,000 in strategic funding in early 2023 to build an aerospace medicine network that improves access to care for students. This investment allowed UND to expand aviation medical services, train additional HIMS AMEs, and integrate aviation psychologists into the College of Aerospace. UND's Student Health Services now employs three FAA AMEs and performs nearly 1,000 aviation medical evaluations annually. With this funding,

UND also trained additional staff to navigate FAA paperwork and ensure streamlined support for pilots seeking special issuance medical certificates. The UND Counseling Center embedded a full-time aviation psychologist and supported the training of three additional psychologists with HIMS certifications, further breaking down barriers to care.

### Conclusion

With the infrastructure in place at UND, North Dakota is well-positioned to expand aerospace medicine services beyond the university and assist nearly 5,000 pilots across the state. By working with the North Dakota Aviation Association, North Dakota Aeronautics Commission, North Dakota Medical Association, and North Dakota Psychological Association, the proposed Center will create a statewide network supporting the aviation community.

The establishment of the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine represents a critical investment in the health and safety of aviation professionals. By securing funding through Bill 1612 North Dakota can lead the way in addressing the medical and mental health needs of pilots and air traffic controllers while fostering education and research that will shape the future of aerospace medicine.

I strongly urge your support for this bill, ensuring that North Dakota remains at the forefront of aviation safety and healthcare innovation. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I welcome any questions the committee may have.

## **Important Terms:**

Aviation Medical Examiner (AME): A FAA-designated medical doctor trained by the FAA to complete medical certification exams for pilots, air traffic controllers, and unmanned aircraft systems.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): a governmental body of the United States with powers to regulate all aspects of civil aviation, as well as over its surrounding international waters.

Human Intervention Motivation Study Aviation Medical Examiner (HIMS AME): A FAA-designated AME who has successfully completed and passed additional training in evaluating pilots for substance- or alcohol-related conditions other mental health conditions.

Human Intervention Motivation Study Psychologist (HIMS Psychologist): A FAA-designated psychologist who has successfully completed and passed additional training in evaluating pilots for substance- or alcohol-related conditions other mental health conditions.

Medical Certificate: All pilots must complete a medical examination and evaluation of medical history as prior to flying.