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Senate Bill 2143
Human Services Committee
February 27, 2019

Good afternoon, Chairman Weisz and members of the Human Service Committee. My name is Bobbie Will, and I am the Primary Care Office Director at the North Dakota Department of Health. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 2143.

In 1994, the North Dakota State Legislature established student loan repayments for certain health care professionals to increase the number of providers in areas of the state with defined health professional shortages. Eligible providers include physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, certified nurse midwives and most recently behavioral health professionals. Individuals apply after they have secured employment in a rural, underserved area and are licensed in the state. Loan repayment serves as an incentive to recruit and retain providers in these areas of need.

The Health Professional Student Loan Repayment Program has been successful in addressing workforce shortages. Last year we had 91 physicians, advanced practice providers, and behavioral health providers apply for the health care professional loan repayment program and awarded funding to 16 providers.

Currently, 43-12.3-06 requires a specific payment amount by discipline each year not to exceed a specific total contract award over five years. There have been circumstances where an awardee's outstanding loans are paid in

less than five years based on the current statutorily required annual payment. This results in holding them under contract in our rural communities less than the intended five years and in funding that cannot be utilized for other contracts. The proposed amendments in Senate Bill 2143 will allow flexibility for the State Health Council to award additional providers within the current appropriation if a provider's loan amount is less than the maximum amount allowed per profession. This flexibility to award providers at a lesser amount would increase providers in underserved areas for at least 5 years. In 2018, the Department of Health could have awarded funding to at least two additional providers should the proposed language change have been in effect.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.