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Testimony By
Pre-Veterinary Students
At
Montana State University
Tristan Arrington
Jessica Malberg
Jesse Olsen
For support of
WICHE Veterinary Medical Schools

Joint Subcommittee for Education

Good morning Chairperson and Committee Members. My name is Tristan Arrington. I am a Billings native and a post-bachelor student studying pre-veterinary coursework at MSU-Bozeman. In the future I will be applying to veterinary school. I am here with supporting members of the MSU Pre-Veterinary Club to discuss the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Professional School Exchange Program. On behalf of the other pre-veterinary students at MSU-Bozeman, as well as our advisor Dr. Rebecca Mattix, I thank you for the opportunity to speak today and to extend our gratitude for your continued support of the nine current positions available. Today, we will be presenting a brief history of the WICHE program, the financial burden veterinary students are faced with, and the need for veterinarians in the state of Montana.

Since its inception in 1953, WICHE has provided students of the western region an opportunity to affordably attend professional schools that otherwise are not available in certain western states. This vital program allows Montana students a more equal opportunity to attain a professional education along with those students who reside in states with professional schools. With WICHE support, an increased number of students return to their home states to become medical professionals and be an active part of their community. This advantage allows Montana graduates of the WICHE program more financial freedom to begin practicing in the state with a lower starting salary, compared to the national average.

With agriculture being Montana's leading industry, it is evident that qualified veterinary professionals will be a valuable part of Montana's workforce. A survey of veterinarians in the state showed that 44 of 126 practice owners reported that it was difficult to find good quality veterinarians willing to stay and practice veterinary medicine in Montana.¹ Throughout the 51-year history of WICHE, graduates returning to Montana to practice veterinary medicine show a substantial return on Montana taxpayer dollars.

A report, updated in 1998, and prepared by WICHE in Boulder, Colorado projected that per year through 2005 there should be 10 annual openings for veterinary positions.² Thus, for every Montana WICHE student that receives support, the state receives a new veterinarian.³

Continual legislative support of the WICHE program is an economically responsible and honorable decision that can allow talented resident students access to affordable professional education in veterinary medicine. Ultimately, this contribution is also a solid investment in Montana's present and future agriculture economy.

Thank you for your time today. I am now turning the podium over to Jessica Malberg, who will provide some information on the economic implications of WICHE.

¹ Survey conducted by MSU Pre-Veterinary Club. 1996.

² Report prepared for the Montana Commissioners of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Montana's Professional Workforce. Prepared by WICHE in Boulder, CO. Revised January 2, 1998.

³ Report prepared by the Deaconess Research Institute. April 6, 1994.

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Jessica Malberg and I am a senior at Montana State University where this spring I will be completing the requirements for admission into veterinary school as well as receiving my Bachelors degree in Biology. As a native Montanan, I would like to thank you for your past recognition of the importance of veterinary medicine in Montana through your support of WICHE's Professional Student Exchange Program. This program supports students pursuing careers in not only veterinary medicine but also throughout a range of other medically related fields, a few of which are optometry, pharmacy, physical therapy, podiatry, and public health. WICHE also supports graduate library studies and architecture. For each of these fields, WICHE has increased Montana's ability to retain professionals by easing the debt load incurred during their education and thereby providing an opportunity for them to return to practice in a manner affordable to the local economy. This has only increased the overall quality of life in Montana by providing its residents with access to essential services at affordable rates.

Maintaining these services for the residents of Montana is paramount, especially in regard to the field of veterinary medicine. The Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that cattle and calves were the number one agricultural commodity for the state of Montana in 2003.¹ This industry generated approximately \$955,000 in farm receipts; comprising 50.5 percent of the state's total farm receipts.² In order to maintain the cattle industry as a vital player in Montana's economy, economical veterinary services must be available to local cattle production operations. Subsequently, affordable education must be available to those who will become veterinarians. Residents of Montana who become Doctors of Veterinary Medicine are forced to pursue their professional education outside of the state. The cost of a Montanan student to attend and out of state school is approximately \$35,000 per year, at an average of 4 years to complete the program; this leaves the student with a debt load of approximately \$140,000.³ Comparatively, the current start up salary for a veterinarian practicing in Montana is estimated to be \$33,000 annually, making it economically impractical for any of these Montanan students to return to Montana.⁴ Thankfully, Montana's support of the WICHE Professional Student Exchange Program

allows Montana residents to pursue their education in veterinary medicine at a cost ranging from \$11,000 to \$20,000 per year. Providing these students with a reduced debt load, ranging from \$44,000 to \$80,000, greatly increases the feasibility of their return to Montana to practice.⁵ Historically, Western states involved in WICHE have seen 60% of these students to their home states.⁶ Each of these returning Montanan veterinarians pays an average of \$6,000 in income taxes per year in addition to the aid they provide to Montana's agricultural economy.⁷ The American Veterinary Medical Association reported that each veterinary practice established in Montana generates approximately \$460,000 in revenue per year and creates an average of four additional employment opportunities for local Montanans.⁸

Montana's past involvement in WICHE has attributed to the current success of the state's largest agricultural commodity, the domestic livestock industry. Your present support of WICHE will therefore prove pivotal to the future success Montana's economy, as Jesse Olsen will now address. On behalf of Montana State University's pre-veterinary students, I thank you for your time, your willingness to listen, and we are continually grateful for your support.

¹ *Economic Research Service*. 15 December 2004. U.S. Department of Agriculture. 12 January 2005. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/MT.htm>>.

² *Economic Research Service*. 15 December 2004. U.S. Department of Agriculture. 12 January 2005. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/MT.htm>>.

³ *Student Financial Services*. 12 July 2004. Colorado State University. 12 January 2005. <<http://sfs.colostate.edu/e20000.cfm>>.

⁴ American Veterinary Medical Association. *Economic Report on Veterinarians and Veterinary Practices*. 2001 Ed. Schamburg, Illinois: American Veterinary Medical Association. 2001. (17)

⁵ *Student Financial Services*. 12 July 2004. Colorado State University. 12 January 2005. <<http://sfs.colostate.edu/e20000.cfm>>.

⁶ "Workforce Brief: Montana." August 2003. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. 12 January 2005. <<http://www.wiche.edu/Workforce>>.

⁷ Mean annual earnings for of a Montana Veterinarian in 2000, \$60,910 ("Workforce Brief: Montana." August 2003. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. 12 January 2005. <<http://www.wiche.edu/Workforce>>.); estimated income tax calculated by the "Montana taxes- basic rates," system (*Montana taxes: basic rates*. Marcie Hamburg. 3 Dec. 2004. Richland Economic Development Corporation. 12 January 2004. <<http://www.richlandeconomicdevelopment.com>>)

⁸ American Veterinary Medical Association. Economic Report on Veterinarians and Veterinary Practices. 2001 Ed. Schamburg, Illinois: American Veterinary Medical Association. 2001. (31,20)

Thank you Jessica.... Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is **Jesse Olsen** and I am one of the 140 students enrolled in the pre-veterinary program at MSU-Bozeman. I too will be applying to veterinary schools this upcoming fall.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before this committee. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues, Miss Arrington and Miss Malberg. The efforts and support from these students, as well as, the rest of the Pre-veterinary students (Please Stand) are greatly appreciated.

It is obvious that the WICHE program does not only make it affordable for Montana students to gain higher education, but it also makes higher education far more accessible. As opposed to a less than 1% (7) chance, a 36% (6) acceptance rate and an average debt load of \$60,000 under WICHE sponsorship helps qualified Montana students not only afford veterinary school, but also allows them to return to practice in Montana. Through this support, the loyalty of WICHE graduates has shown an excellent return of state investment. Of the 84% that have returned to WICHE states, 39% have returned to Montana to practice (2).

The question must then be asked, what is the job market like for Montana veterinarians. Dr. Mark E. Mattix, the MVMA President and advisor to WICHE, stated that there is an impending crisis for veterinary practitioners in the rural west. After tallying the Montana listings of a 2003 American Veterinary Medical Association Directory, I found that 58% of the veterinarians in these listings graduated in 1985 or earlier (3). Also, according to a Montana Research and Analysis Bureau employment projection study, there would be a

22% increase in veterinarian positions available from year 2000 to 2010 (5). This can only indicate that there will be a greater need for veterinarians in the future.

Take a poll of any of these students behind me today, and you will find that they come from communities, large and small, all over the state, with a variety of backgrounds and goals in veterinary medicine. As for myself, I was raised on a small ranch outside of Laurel, MT and plan to study large animal medicine once accepted into veterinary school. Upon completion, I will stay true and return to Montana for a career of practice.

With the scarcity of rural practitioners and the economics we have presented, I urge the committee to be conscious of the relationships between veterinary medicine, Montana's agricultural industry, and current animal and public health issues.

Thank you for hearing our concerns. May we answer any questions?

- 1.) American Veterinary Medical Association. Economic Report on Veterinarians and Veterinary Practices. 2001 Ed. Schamburg, Illinois: American Veterinary Medical Association. 2001. (17)
- 2.) American Veterinary Medical Association Directory. Geographic Listings. 2003.
- 3.) American Veterinary Medical Association Directory. Alphabetical Listings. 2003
- 4.) *Student Financial Services*. 12 July 2004. Colorado State University. 12 January 2005. <<http://sfs.colostate.edu/e20000.cfm>>.
- 5.) Montana Research and Analysis Bureau. Montana Professional Employment Projections, 2000-2010. 2000. Table 2
- 6.) Mattix, Rebecca J. Facts Regarding Today's Program Before The Legislature. October 5, 2004
- 7.) AAVMC Veterinary Medical School Admissions Requirements Handbook. 2003