

# Alberta Darling

## Wisconsin State Senator

Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Finance

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Insurance, Financial Services, Government  
Oversight and Courts

Senate Bill 155

Tuesday, July 16, 2019

Thank you Chair Craig and committee members for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 155. This bill will ensure that volunteer health providers who serve the homeless are covered under the state's liability insurance program.

In Wisconsin, the Volunteer Health Care Program (VHCP) provides liability insurance for licensed health professionals who volunteer their services to provide outpatient care at free clinics. In order for a clinic to be eligible for this program, they must serve primarily low-income persons who are uninsured and not recipients of Medicaid or Medicare. This program is very successful in protecting our volunteer doctors who serve in free and charitable clinics.

As a state, we have made significant strides at reducing and eliminating homelessness. Our free and charitable clinics are often the first line of defense by providing necessary medical care to the homeless who enter their doors. Additionally, many clinics provide outreach and mobilize their clinics to begin the path to treatment and stability for our homeless. Unfortunately, the restrictive language in an administrative rule for the Volunteer Health Care Program limits free clinics' ability to serve the homeless without jeopardizing the liability insurance their doctors need to practice.

Homeless individuals in Wisconsin are often enrolled in Medicaid. As such, when free and charitable clinics serve this population, they are no longer eligible for the Volunteer Health Care Program. Senate Bill 155 changes the eligibility for participation in the VHCP so that providers who serve the homeless in free and charitable clinics can still maintain their liability insurance through the state.

This bill removes a serious disincentive for our qualified health professionals to serve our state's homeless population. Senate Bill 155 streamlines the process for healthcare professionals to donate their time and services to a meaningful cause by providing the assurance that their liability insurance is still covered.

Thank you committee members for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 155. I'd like to also thank Representative Thiesfeldt, Senator Johnson, and the many advocates in the Wisconsin Association for Free and Charitable Clinics who brought this issue to my attention. I hope to count on your support for this important initiative.



STATE SENATOR  
**LaTonya Johnson**

WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

6<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT

**Senate Committee on Insurance, Financial Services, Government Oversight and Courts**

**Testimony on 2019 Senate Bill 155**

**July 16, 2019**

Chairman Craig and members of the committee, thank you for holding a hearing on SB 155.

Wisconsin is one of the top states for insurance coverage; however, until every individual has both coverage and access to health care, free and charitable clinics will be an important part of the health care system in many of our communities. Senate Bill 155 enhances access to care by allowing providers to be covered under the Volunteer Health Care Provider (VHCP) program when caring for homeless individuals.

The Volunteer Health Care Program provides liability insurance for licensed health professionals who volunteer their services to provide outpatient care at free clinics. Currently, the VHCP does not cover professionals who provide care to those enrolled in Medicaid—as is the case with many homeless individuals. In order to allow homeless individuals to receive treatment wherever they might reside or seek out care, this bill removes an unnecessary obstacle for this vulnerable, at-risk population.

While definitions of homelessness vary, we know that it is a very real problem for thousands in our communities. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in 2018 there were an estimated 4,907 homeless Wisconsinites on any given day. Further, according to public school data reported to the U.S. Department of Education, during the 2016-17 school year, an estimated 18,592 public school students experienced homelessness over the course of the year.

Wisconsin's nearly 100 free and charitable clinics provide critical access to care for over 150,000 residents. I think we can all agree that we should not require our volunteer health care professionals to choose between caring for homeless Wisconsinites in need and maintaining their liability insurance through the VHCP.

This legislation is supported by the Wisconsin Association of Free and Charitable Clinics and the Wisconsin Nurses Association.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to testify today and for your consideration of this bipartisan, necessary legislation. I would also like to thank Sen. Darling and Reps. Thiesfeldt, Stuck, and Felzkowski for their work on this bill.