

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Health and Human Services Committee May 18, 2021

*Indicates written testimony submitted prior to the public hearing per
our COVID-19 response protocol

ARCH: [RECORDER MALFUNCTION] and welcome to the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is John Arch. I represent the 14th Legislative District in Sarpy County and I serve as Chair of the HHS Committee. I'd like to invite the members of the committee to introduce themselves starting on my right with Senator Day.

DAY: I'm Senator Jen Day and I represent Legislative District 49, which is northwestern Sarpy County.

MURMAN: Hello. I'm Senator Dave Murman, from District 38, representing seven counties in south-central Nebraska.

WILLIAMS: Matt Williams from Gothenburg, Legislative District 36, representing Custer, Dawson, and the north portion of Buffalo Counties.

ARCH: Also assisting the committee is one of our legal counsels, Paul Henderson, and our committee clerk, Geri Williams. A few notes about our policies and procedures: This afternoon we will be having two hearings on gubernatorial appointments. First we will hear the appointment of Valerie Hitz to the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. And second, we will hear the appointment of Colten Palmer to the State Board of Health. Each appointee will begin with an opening statement. After the opening statement, the committee members will have the opportunity to ask questions. Then we will hear from supporters, opponents, and those wishing to speak in a neutral capacity. If there is anyone who plans to testify, please fill out a green testifier sheet, located on the table near the entrance to the hearing room. When it's your turn to testify, please begin by stating your name clearly into the microphone, and then spell both your first and last name. Senator Walz joined us, if you could introduce yourself as well.

WALZ: Good afternoon. My name is Senator Walz and I represent District 15, which is all Dodge County.

ARCH: So we will begin today's gubernatorial appointments with Valerie Hitz. We will be speaking with Ms. Hitz through Sharon Sinkler, who is a Sign Language interpreter, so it will be Ms. Sinkler's voice, but Ms. Hitz's words, that you will be hearing coming through the speaker. I do anticipate a little bit of delay between the questions and the

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answers, so just be aware of that. With that, welcome, Ms. Hitz, and please begin by telling us a little bit about yourself and your interest in serving on the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): Hello. Thank you. Yes, my name is Valerie and I am a person who's deaf, and am-- I have a large deaf family and I've always had an interest in the deaf community. NCDHH is a perfect fit for me to become a board member, to participate and provide information on how we can serve the deaf community and their families. I just joined the commission as a board member and had their first meeting, and I really am glad I am a part of this. I look forward to serving. I have two children and they can hear; however, they can sign, just like the interpreter can right now, so their culture is part of deaf culture. I like to see people involved from different cultures to get an understanding and an empathy for each other, the diversity and all of that.

ARCH: OK, thank you very much. Questions from the senators? Senator Williams.

WILLIAMS: Thank you, Chairman Arch. And thank you, Ms. Hitz, for your willingness to serve on the commission. We've experienced a great working relationship with this commission over the years that I've been on the HHS Committee. Recognizing that you bring a special talent with your deafness to the commission, what specific types of items do you believe the commission should be centered on?

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): So far, we have gotten a lot more recognition. We're having success in children who are deaf and public schools. If they really need that additional help and service, we are sending them to an Iowa School for the Deaf, and I'd like to see more of that. They need access to schools for the deaf. Education that they receive is different. Language, obviously, is very important. We use American Sign Language, so I'd like to see more and more of those who really need the school for the deaf and their services to be able to attend those schools. Some of Nebraska's school programs and afterschool programs and camps, they have a good balance of interaction between children who are deaf. I grew up and, you know, children who are deaf and attend a school for the deaf and children who attend public schools, I think my main focus is assisting children who are deaf. NCDHH has a lot that they can provide, lots of services,

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but just not a lot of deaf children and their families are aware of
the commission. So I-- that's what I am looking forward to, is
promoting their services.

WILLIAMS: Thank you very much.

ARCH: Other questions from the senators? I have-- I have one question.
Did you have any experience previously with the-- the commission?

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): No. However, I have availed their
services, I'm very familiar with what they can provide. And, you know,
I-- they used to have an interpreting-- an interpreter referral
program, which I used. They also have specialized telephone
communication device programs. I've used that, fire alarm, signaling
devices, so I have used their services. But this is my first time
being involved as a person, like on their board.

ARCH: Thank you. How did you hear about the opportunity to serve?

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): They had-- the commission has a
Facebook page and they have a wonderful page where they promote
activities and things that they are-- are involved in and-- and doing.
So I looked. I saw the post on Facebook and just felt like, yes, this
is indeed something that I am very interested in, so I filled out the
application and had my fingers crossed. And they finally contacted me
this year, and so I'm very excited to serve.

ARCH: Are there-- are there other members, or how many other members
on the commission are deaf and hard of hearing? Do you happen to know?

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): There are three. The chairperson,
the current chairperson, is deaf. It's a wonderful experience for her.
And then there are other-- two other deaf people, including me.

ARCH: Thank you. Thank you. Well, we appreciate your willingness to
serve. We-- we need people such as yourself who have experience, who
have passion, who want to make the world a better place, and this--
this is a great opportunity to do that. We will consider your
appointment. And assuming that we vote that out of committee, we-- it
will be sent to the full Legislature for their approval and that
should happen quite quickly. We are only going to be in session
through the end of next week, so I am assuming your appointment by the
Legislature will happen either this week or early the next week, if

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necessary. But we will-- as soon as-- as soon as we are aware, we'll
communicate with you our decision on your appointment. And-- and I
know that your willingness to serve is very important to us, and
you're obviously very well qualified, so thank you for today and thank
you for volunteering to do this work.

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): Thank you so much. Yes, I am, like
I said, looking forward to the results and then we'll just go from
there. I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you so much.

ARCH: Thank you very much and have a good day.

VALERIE HITZ (THROUGH INTERPRETER): You as well. Thank you so much.
Bye-bye.

ARCH: Bye. This will end the gubernatorial confirmation hearing for
Valerie Hitz, and Colton Palmer will be our next candidate for
gubernatorial confirmation, who is a nurse practitioner with-- and
this would be an appointment to the State Board of Health. Colton--
Colton is also going to be on the phone. He is-- he will fill the role
of a credentialed mental health practitioner on the Board of Health.
And he is-- he'll call in? OK. Did you tell him a particular time?

_____ : 12:25.

ARCH: 12:25, OK. [PHONE RINGS] Is this Colton Palmer?

COLTON PALMER: Yes, it is.

ARCH: This is Chairman Arch, and we're ready for your hearing. Before
we begin, I want to just let you know who's in the room, so if the
senators could please introduce themselves to Colton Palmer.

DAY: This is Senator Jen Day and I represent Legislative District 49,
which is northwestern Sarpy County.

MURMAN: Hello. I'm Senator Dave Murman, from District 38, and I
represent seven counties in south-central Nebraska.

WALZ: Hello. My name is Lynne Walz and I represent District 15, which
is all of Dodge County.

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WILLIAMS: Matt Williams, from Gothenburg, Legislative District 36, Dawson Custer, and the north portion of Buffalo Counties.

B. HANSEN: Senator Ben Hansen, District 16, Washington, Burt, and Cuming Counties.

ARCH: And I'm Senator John Arch and I represent District 14, which is Papillion, La Vista, and Sarpy County. So, Mr. Palmer, I-- we-- we start out with talking a little bit about-- if you have an opportunity to share with us, a little bit about your background and your interest in serving on the Board of Health, and so we'll just open it up to you and tell us a little bit about yourself.

COLTON PALMER: Absolutely. Well, great to hear from everybody. Glad to be here. So my name's Colton and-- Palmer, and I've been in healthcare roughly a decade in varying roles and all age groups from, you know, young kids at Boys Town to taking care of elderly people and everything in between in multiple healthcare settings through that time and multiple roles starting as a CNA and a CMA working my way through as an RN, a BSN, and then eventually completing my master's degree with an emphasis in psychiatry, and so I'm board certified by the ANCC to-- to treat all ages of psychiatric illness. And in that role, I have functioned in an inpatient setting at Lasting Hope Recovery Center for a few years and just recently put an end to that this April after a few years, in that role have operated in outpatient clinics and-- and done some emergency department assistance in the Papillion, at Midlands Hospital for around a year, and then operate now in my own clinic in the-- in the central part of Omaha around 120th and Pacific. I've ran my own clinic now for a couple of years, doing like outpatient treatments, have-- in that clinic, have done some specialized treatments such as transcranial magnetic stimulation [INAUDIBLE] and did some training at Duke for that, but have since just kind of refocused primarily on medication management services, so that's kind of my career, historical background. And mental health to me is really important. Kind of, in college, had some good friends that had mental health diagnoses and that really helped me to realize (1) the reality of mental health, you know, that it's as real as physical health, just a little different in how it presents; and (2) the need to help-- help people with those illnesses. And that's what kind of drove me into mental health and-- and since then, I've continued to be very passionate about, you know, making sure that people are taken care of and, you know, can find a sense of wellness.

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And my interest in the board is just to ensure, you know, that the interest of, you know, the people of the state of Nebraska, as well as the healthcare community, that quality of care can be established, that good standards exist in that-- whatever way that I can help to make sure that, within the context of the board's role in that, that I can help assist, whether that's giving some perspective from my background or whether that's just, you know, listening and hearing what others are saying from their backgrounds and-- and-- and being able to, you know, facilitate good choices for the state of Nebraska and hopefully, you know, promote a better sense of well-being and health and, you know, kind of set the standard for the nation even as the state, you know, with how we-- how we manage healthcare in the state. So I think that would sum up kind of my goals, my history. And if anyone has any questions, I'd be happy to answer.

ARCH: Great. Thank you very much. Questions from the senators? Senator Williams.

WILLIAMS: Thank you, Chairman Arch. And-- and thank you, Mr. Palmer, for your willingness to serve on the State Board of Health. I've-- I've got two questions. One is the pandemic certainly pointed out the need for telemedicine. This committee has worked very hard to be sure that telemedicine is recognized as a form of treatment for-- for mental health. And you-- what have you experienced with the change with COVID and telemedicine?

COLTON PALMER: A couple of things. One, it does provide an additional resource. I mean, COVID, obviously, very specific situation, but there's going to be lots of situations in life, and I've seen that, you know, what if someone just had a baby or, you know, can't get off work or the-- a husband or wife is working or all the situations in life that have come up and still come up. The telehealth component has been, you know, really helpful, actually. I do like seeing people in person, and many people like that, as well, and so I've continued to be able to provide that as well. But I think what the telehealth provides is for those who need that service, they can get it because there could be a barrier to care for people for a variety of reasons that that telemedicine kind of overrides that and ensures that people still have that, you know, access. And I think, you know, if COVID something positive for mental health-- you know, it did plenty negative, but the positive thing would be is that we see how access can be improved and-- and, through that, hopefully better healthcare

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outcomes. So that's kind of my experience with it, and I found it to be very helpful and certainly been very useful for many patients that I've took care of.

WILLIAMS: And the second part of that question deals with the fact that I'm from a rural area and we suffer from a greater lack of-- of services and also practitioners in the rural areas than you do in-- in Omaha and Lincoln area. We deal with a lot of what are called scope-of-practice issues as they relate to various medical kind of professions, and there are certainly some that deal with prescribing medications that have come up before us in the last few years, and not really a question, but just to point out to you that we will appreciate your input as a mental health practitioner into those areas of scope of practice and would ask that you pay special attention to those things and think about the availability of healthcare in our more rural areas. And you might want to respond to the-- the challenge that we have, as you know it, in rural areas.

COLTON PALMER: Absolutely. So although I live in Omaha currently-- we just sold our home but-- but, you know, intend to still be in Nebraska. We have our family here. But-- but I've grown and actually lived in multiple rural places in my life with my dad when I was younger, actually graduated from-- my class had 18 kids, so that's as small as, you know, you can imagine a school being nowadays. And so I'm very familiar with rural settings, rural healthcare access, even just firsthand. And, you know, I think I'd love to help in any way I can to help resolve some of those issues, and there's a variety of means that that could be done, whether that's kind of, you know, helping the primary care providers, you know, to-- to have greater sense of confidence in their treatment options and, you know, maybe just simple training to have even a treatment plan in place, maybe with the help of, you know, maybe a psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse practitioner in a bigger city who can help set up a basic plan of action, or something like that would be an example of ways that how do we-- how do we navigate, and so, yeah, definitely have different ideas and different thoughts about that and definitely see the importance. I would love to help resolve some of those challenges.

WILLIAMS: Thank you

COLTON PALMER: Yep.

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ARCH: Other questions? Senator Walz.

WALZ: I don't know if you're going to ask this, Senator Arch, or not, but-- with this one-- how did you hear about the-- the opening for the State Board of Health?

COLTON PALMER: I was reached out by-- gosh, trying to think. It was-- it was-- I was made aware of it by-- it was by a lobbying group, I believe, but initially a nurse practitioner I work with, who's in family practice, had brought my name up to-- [INAUDIBLE] their name, trying to think of the name, but the-- basically a local nurse practitioner had brought. It is the lobbying arm for the local, I believe, the U.S.-- the Nebraska bishops for the Catholic Church. I'm trying to think who it is. I can't think of the name of that committee, but that's who it is. That's-- that-- that was who reached out to me and-- and-- and-- and gauged my interest in the role. And that occurred, like I said, through a reference, a recommendation from a primary care provider who I work with on a regular basis, as far as referrals. And I can't think of the name of that organization, but there's just one. I think it's Tom Venzor was the gentleman's name. I can't think of the-- the committee's name, but Tom Venzor was the guy's name who-- who was-- who reached out to me.

WALZ: That's good. Isn't it nice to know that people think of you when it comes time for appointing people to boards?

COLTON PALMER: Yeah, yeah, I didn't-- I didn't even know it was-- exactly. So I wouldn't say like I was searching for-- for the position. I have served. When I was a student, I served on Ogallala's student nursing board and I did some time, just briefly here, with the local chapter for the psychiatric nurse practitioners. It's an organization that I just served on there just briefly, as well, but-- but, yeah, no, I was happy to get the invitation and though, you know, I'd love to, at least for-- for this period, you know, see what it's about and see how I can help and facilitate any positive changes, so.

WALZ: Thank you.

COLTON PALMER: No problem.

ARCH: Any other questions? Seeing none, let me tell you a little bit about the process. After our hearing today, we will consider your

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appointment. And assuming that that is a positive vote, it will go to the full Legislature for their approval, and it will happen probably pretty quickly because we only have a few more days left in session of this-- of this-- this long session that we have to-- right now. So it'll happen pretty quickly, but we will get back to you shortly on our decision. And again, others have expressed it, but I will as well. Thank you very much for your willingness to participate and to volunteer your time. It's a very important role and we are-- we-- we really depend upon the Board of Health to advise us as a-- as a healthcare committee on the best policy, so thank you very much.

COLTON PALMER: No problem. No problem. I appreciate the opportunity.

ARCH: All right. Well, you have a good day and thank you again.

COLTON PALMER: You too. Thank you, everybody. Have a nice day.
Bye-bye.

ARCH: Bye. So this will end the hearing. This will end the gubernatorial appointment hearings. I see no one here to testify as a proponent, opponent, or in the neutral capacity, so we will-- we will end the hearing with that. Thank you.