



**Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities  
Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 92  
Presented by Daniel Hellenbrand, PhD  
May 15, 2025**

Chairperson Murphy and members of the committee,

Thank you for holding this public hearing today. I am Dan Hellenbrand and I am here today to express support for Assembly Bill 92 as a representative of the UW School of Medicine and Public Health and UW Health. I am also here to endorse the bill because this legislation is particularly meaningful to me. Allow me to explain.

In 2003, I was working as a carpenter and suffered a C5 spinal cord injury after a fall from a house we were building in Middleton. This basically changed everything in my life. After my accident, I went back to school and earned a PhD in Biomedical Engineering from UW-Madison. Since 2010, I have been working at the UW as a researcher in the Department of Neurological Surgery. The reason I pursued a degree in Biomedical Engineering is because I firmly believe research will lead to better treatments for spinal cord injury.

Since I'm living with a spinal cord injury and researching treatments for the injury, I offer a unique perspective. Today, I would like to outline three primary reasons I believe Assembly Bill 92 makes sense for Wisconsin.

1. State funding supports excellent scientists right here in Wisconsin:
  - a. A comprehensive return of function after chronic spinal cord injury will come from a combination of factors. Wisconsin has several excellent research institutions including University of Wisconsin campuses, Marquette, Medical College of Wisconsin and more with many incredible researchers working on several distinct aspects needed for developing treatments for spinal cord injury.
  - b. State funding will help train and keep these great scientists in Wisconsin working directly on treatments for spinal cord injury. In our lab, we have had some excellent PhD students and I want to see them continue in the field of developing treatments for spinal cord injury.
2. The program is designed to directly develop treatments for chronic spinal cord injury:
  - a. These research grants target the development of deliverable therapies designed to greatly enhance the quality of life for patients living with the injury.
  - b. The research grants are programmatically tiered with larger grants designed to push current science toward clinical trials and smaller grants designed to test new exploratory findings.

- c. The program implements a state advisory council composed of researchers, clinicians, and, most importantly, those living with spinal cord injury like me, to recommend which research projects should be funded.

3. State funding will bring money back to Wisconsin:

- a. The current states with seed funding had an 8:1 return on investment bringing funds back to Wisconsin including large federal grants, and from private foundations such as Wings for Life grants, Craig H. Nielson. This has also led to several private business startups and industry partnerships.
- b. Most of the funding for spinal cord injury has come from federal NIH and DOD grants that generally require preliminary data, which is difficult to obtain without proper funding. State level funding, as proposed in Assembly Bill 92, helps to address this discord.
- c. The benefits of seed funding are clearly illustrated by the fact that the five states that received the most federal funding for spinal cord injury research have state seed funding mechanisms.
  - i. As a researcher, this clearly demonstrates that state funding works to move research forward and brings money back to the state.
  - ii. Several good federal grant applications likely weren't funded in states *without* seed money.
- d. Proposed reductions in grant funding at the federal level will make spinal cord injury research funding far more competitive. The grant program established by AB92 will help bolster Wisconsin researchers seeking grant funds in a highly competitive environment.

In closing, I'd like to thank the authors of this legislation for their commitment to spinal cord injury research. Representative Tittl and Senator Wanggaard, have developed a strong bill that I hope you give your full consideration. My sincere appreciation to those of you who have already indicated your support by signing onto the legislation.

Thank you for your interest and attention today. I'd be happy to take questions from committee members at this time.