

## Testimony in Support of House Bill 1410

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Good morning Chairman Klemin and members of the House Judiciary Committee. My name is Mark Jorritsma and I am the Executive Director of Family Policy Alliance of North Dakota. I am testifying in support of House Bill 1410 and respectfully request that you render a “DO PASS” on this bill.

At its heart, HB1410 is intended to ensure fundamental protections for religious exercise in correctional facilities and during emergency orders. But how important is religion in the setting of a state institution such as a correctional facility? Perhaps the most comprehensive data on this may be from a survey of prison chaplains in all 50 states by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life. It found the following.

*Overwhelmingly, state prison chaplains consider religious counseling and other religion-based programming an important aspect of rehabilitating prisoners. Nearly three-quarters of the chaplains (73%), for example, say they consider access to religion-related programs in prison to be “absolutely critical” to successful rehabilitation of inmates. And 78% say they consider support from religious groups after inmates are released from prison to be absolutely critical to inmates’ successful rehabilitation and re-entry into society. Among chaplains working in prisons that have religion-related rehabilitation or re-entry programs, more than half (57%) say the quality of such programs has improved over the last three years and six-in-ten (61%) say participation in such programs has gone up.<sup>1</sup>*

As this study clearly shows, exercise of religious faith is critical in the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Given the importance of religion, there is the obvious issue of religious freedom. Religious freedom, or our ability to seek the truth about God and live according to our beliefs, has been an essential part of America from the beginning. No other nation has such robust protection of religious freedom. James Madison described it as an “unalienable right.” The Declaration of Independence recognizes these rights as “endowed by [our] Creator.” The Constitution and other legal protections reflect the importance of religious freedom to America.<sup>2</sup> These freedoms also extend to those serving sentences in correctional facilities.

Religious freedom also becomes of primary interest when one considers a case such as an emergency order, also addressed in this bill. As we have recently seen with COVID-19, the intrusion of the state into freedom of religion is a core issue to what it means to be Americans and have rights like those embodied in the First Amendment. Any effort to repress our freedom to worship, teach, and live out our beliefs is an attack not just on human dignity, but on the very foundation that has made America strong.

It is for these reasons that I respectfully ask you to vote House Bill 1410 out of committee with a “DO PASS” recommendation.

I would now be happy to stand for any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/22/prison-chaplains-exec/>

<sup>2</sup> *What You Need to Know About Religious Freedom*, The Heritage Foundation, Dec 1, 2018