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Testimony

Senate Bill 2311 – Human Services

2/9/2021

Good morning Chairman Lee and members of the committee. My name is Tara Lea Muhlhauser, Executive Director of CAWS North Dakota (ND) (Lobbyist #1035). I ask that you support this bill.

CAWS North Dakota is a coalition of programs in the state that provide services for victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. I represent the 20 programs across the state of North Dakota.

For health and wellness curricula to be most effective, it is vital to address the shared risk and protective factors between mental health, suicide prevention, bullying, and healthy relationships. Risk factors are a set of behaviors or conditions that increase the risk for violence perpetration, and protective factors are a set of behaviors or conditions that reduce or buffer against the risk for violence prevention.

Research and violence prevention work show that incorporating programming that includes healthy relationship content increases the necessary protective factors for students, such as connection and commitment to school and caring adults, affiliation with pro-social peers, emotional health and connectedness, and empathy and concern for how one's actions affect others (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2019). These protective factors contribute to feelings of inclusion and belonging, decreasing bullying and suicidal behaviors and creating safer environments for students to thrive.

At the individual level, incorporating healthy relationship content that teaches skills and increases connectedness reduces the risk that youth will harm others through dating, youth, and sexual violence, and also decreases the risk for suicide (Wilkins, et al, 2018). By addressing several mental health and violence issues in the same programming, we can maximize resources and expand our prevention efforts for suicide, bullying, dating violence, and sexual violence.

Along with this request to support this bill, please consider addressing healthy relationships as an issue hand-in-hand with mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

Thank you for this opportunity and if you have any questions, please let me know.