

**Testimony of J.P. “Dutch” Bialke
Colonel, USAF (retired)
House Appropriations Committee
Human Resources Division
Roughrider Room, State Capitol
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Chairman Nelson, and members of the House Appropriations Committee, Human Resources Division, I am Colonel J.P. “Dutch” Bialke, USAF (retired). Although I have served for over the past decade as a state employee, I am testifying here solely in my private capacity as a citizen and military veteran.

Just a quick synopsis of my military background. Prior to my military retirement as a Colonel in the United States Air Force in 2014, I had served in our nation’s armed forces for over 29 years, including 7 years in the North Dakota Army National Guard. During my military career, I served 11 years overseas. I was deployed and served three tours of duty in three separate armed conflict operational theaters. I served honorably.

I am a life member of several military veteran organizations. From July 2021 to June 2024, I was appointed by Governor Burgum as a member of the North Dakota Administrative Committee on Veterans Affairs (ACOVA), and, on that committee, from 2023 to 2024, was elected to and served as Chairman, Department of Veterans Affairs and Budget Subcommittee.

As you are aware, ACOVA consists of 15 members from five veteran organizations, namely the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, and Vietnam Veterans of America. N.D.C.C. § 37-18.1-03-1 says that ACOVA appoints the Commissioner of Veterans Affairs, that the Commissioner serves at the pleasure of ACOVA,

and that ACOVA determines the salary of the Commissioner within the limits of legislative appropriation.

As past Chairman of the Department of Veterans Affairs and Budget Subcommittee, I'm here this morning to provide additional background information as to Commissioner of North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs Lonnie Wangen's 2023 salary increase.

During my tenure on ACOVA, I directly and personally observed Commissioner Wangen's professional duty performance. In my view, it is absolutely exemplary. He possesses a deep respect for veterans and is driven by a devout sense of duty to give back to those who served.

Commissioner Wangen works tirelessly each day to address the needs of over 55,000 veterans in North Dakota – in critical areas such as healthcare, employment, housing, and mental health support. He is also an authentic leader, consistently providing outstanding direction to veteran advocates within the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as assistance to veteran service officers throughout the state. He does all of this without a Deputy Commissioner.

He is exceedingly well qualified, having been first appointed as Commissioner by ACOVA in 2008, 17 years ago. He is accredited as a veteran advocate by numerous national veteran organizations. Since 2020, he has been Treasurer of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, and was President of that Association from 2014-2015. He holds two Masters degrees (both focused on leadership and management).

With this backdrop, in the fall of 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Budget Subcommittee took initiative and reviewed his annual compensation. We researched the salary of Commissioner Wangen commensurate to the salaries of other directors, secretaries, and commissioners of veteran affairs in other states, as well as commensurate with the salaries of 21 directors of North Dakota state agencies comparable in size and responsibility to the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs.

Commissioner Wangen's salary was at the bottom of both lists. In my humble view, and the view of other ACOVA members at the time, he was substantially underpaid as an executive official competently leading a significant North Dakota state agency long-term. Consequently, given Commissioner Wangen's consistently exceptional duty performance and his highly demanding and multifaceted duty responsibilities, ACOVA decided to review and properly address this matter.

After comprehensive discussion in both the Department of Veterans Affairs and Budget Subcommittee, and then among all members of AVOCA, ACOVA voted to increase Commissioner Wangen's salary – placing his salary at a little below the midpoint of both: (1) all the salaries of other veteran affairs commissioners of other states; and (2) all the salaries of directors of North Dakota state agencies comparable in size to Department of Veterans Affairs.

It was the collective view of ACOVA that Commissioner Wangen's 2023 salary-increase was long overdue and manifestly the right thing to do.

Chairman Nelson, and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.