

March 10, 2025

HB 1217 DO PASS

Dear Chair Lee and members of the Human Services committee,

My name is Paul Mull, and I have been a resident of North Dakota since 2017. I am a 59-year-old male, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1985 in Miami, Florida.

At 20 years old in 1985, I would not have been voluntarily tested for HIV. That diagnosis saved my life due to early detection. However, at the time a HIV diagnosis was considered a death sentence. I was told I had two years or less to live, because of the lack of information and medical treatments. As such, I decided to party every day of the time I had left, because I would have rather died from anything other than AIDS. I lived this way for 11 years, by which time I realized HIV was likely not going to kill me. Upon that realization, I got clean and started working a program, which allowed me the clarity to realize we had made significant advancements in the treatment of HIV. So, I began receiving treatment.

During the 11 years I lived in fear of dying from AIDS, I made several conscious decisions to ensure I did not spread the virus to others, despite my reckless lifestyle and behaviors. I chose to become celibate and was extremely careful about how I used substances. I knew my conscious would not be able to handle the knowledge that I was responsible for someone else experiencing the shame and isolation that launched me into that drug fueled decade. In that way, I think I represent the vast majority of folks living with HIV.

I have continued to receive on-going regular treatment and am currently undetectable. Through the help of therapists, I am finally able to process the lifetime of trauma and isolation the stigma associated with HIV has had on my life.

When I first became undetectable, I experienced a profound sense of relief and liberation. However, I have learned that disclosure leads to rejection and judgement. I feel I have had a huge part of my life stripped away from me, simply due to the lack of public understanding regarding the evolution of HIV treatment and its subsequent suppression of viral loads to untransmissible levels.

Through the confluence of sobriety, becoming undetectable, and receiving mental health support, I have become extremely motivated to help others living with HIV. It is my sincere belief that in order to properly address the HIV epidemic, we must first address the stigma associated with HIV. Only through addressing stigma will we increase testing and treatment access. Only through addressing stigma, will we help people living with HIV know they are not alone and that there is hope.

Chair Ruby and members of the Human Services Committee, I have done the work. I have lived cautiously, before we knew much about HIV and AIDS. I have achieved sobriety, and I am undetectable. The North Dakota century code has been a significant barrier to my pursuit of happiness and is unfair, but more importantly it is an impediment to testing, treatment, and the eventual end to the HIV epidemic.

I strongly urge you to vote DO PASS on HB 1217.

Sincerely,
Paul Mull