

Testimony for HB 1612

Mr. Chairman and members of the human services committee,

For the record, my name is Ron Lundquist and I am a 767 Captain for Fedex Express. I am a proud alumnus of UND, citizen of District 22 and reside in Kindred ND. I am submitting my support of HB 1612 which will seek to establish a Center for Aerospace Medicine at the University of North Dakota.

In addition to my flight duties at Fedex, I volunteer for the Critical Incident Response Program (CIRP) under the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA). Our committee's mission is to lessen the psychological impact of on-the-job accidents or incidents on crew members and their families. We also assist individuals dealing with traumatic events outside of aviation—such as personal losses or severe accidents—we focus on facilitating recovery to minimize the risk of harmful stress responses that can adversely affect job performance, careers, families, and overall health. While my colleagues and I are not mental health professionals, we have undergone peer support training with the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.

Throughout my career, I have witnessed firsthand the critical importance of addressing mental health issues early, particularly within the aviation sector. Pilots and aerospace professionals view their careers as sacred, and the mere mention of "mental health" often triggers feelings of fear and anxiety about potential career repercussions. This fear can deter individuals from seeking the help they need, ultimately jeopardizing their well-being and safety. Something they've worked so hard for, saved for and committed their life to might be gone in an instant.

During COVID, passenger airlines were all but shut down. Cargo airlines, such as mine, flew incredibly demanding schedules. More time away from families, putting themselves at risk as they flew to virtually every corner of the world. Our crews that primarily flew international (and many domestically) were literally locked in their hotel rooms on layovers for days on end. I saw it take a toll on their (and other carriers' pilots) mental well being. Some suffered to the point where they took leave of absences. Some ultimately took their own lives. This was vastly underreported or not reported at all. Imagine if they knew that getting help wouldn't end their career? Imagine if they knew there were Aviation Medical Examiners (AME's) that were trained to deal with and had resources for these sorts of issues so they could continue their career? And imagine if they were aware of this from early on, BEFORE they started their career.

I have seen many changes in my 29 year airline career. Some good. Some not. HB 1612 and the establishment of the Center for Aerospace Medicine would be a monumental industry change. A good change! Hopefully you realize how this might affect not only the aerospace industry in North Dakota but the country as well. It won't be easy, worthwhile things most often aren't but it's a great start to addressing a problem we've had in aviation for far too long. UND is so well respected nationally and internationally as a leader in aerospace. I would fully expect other schools and ultimately the FAA to look to our blueprint on addressing mental health in aviation.

I humbly ask that you give your full support to HB 1612.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ron Lundquist
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