

HB 1425
Commissioner Jonathan Holth
Senate Judiciary Committee
Senator Diane Larson, Chair
March 19th, 2025 Peace Garden Room

Good morning, Madam Chair Larson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

For the record, my name is Jonathan Holth, Commissioner of Recovery and Re-entry for the State of North Dakota. You have already heard from Lieutenant Governor Michelle Strinden about the Armstrong administration's support of the reentry bill package that came from the interim study process. This morning, I am here to discuss some specific reasons our administration supports each of these bills, beginning with HB 1425.

As you all heard in the Governor's State of the State address, my new role as the Commissioner of Recovery and Re-entry involves operationalizing the relationships between the Legislature, DOCR, county jails, law enforcement, the judicial system, our tribal partners, addiction counselors, and all other partners who play a role in helping people get the services they need to stay safe in our communities. A key part of this role includes thinking about the population that is leaving prisons and jails and setting them up for success in the community, but perhaps an even *more significant* portion of this role involves coordinating interventions that set people up on their road to recovery *before they ever touch the prison system*.

HB 1425 is a bill that offers practical solutions to help people access services that can ultimately change their trajectories and guide them away from the criminal justice system. It is no secret that the spectrum of recovery and reentry work starts before an individual finds themselves in DOCR's custody, and this bill highlights a few different ways to bolster the interventions we have already adopted in North Dakota and make them even more effective.

First, the policy in this bill related to "deflection" acknowledges that our law enforcement officers and first responders are often the first wave of care that a person experiencing a behavioral health crisis receives, and these responders play a critical role in making sure that person is brought somewhere safe where they can receive help. I would like to say that it's a simple process to connect someone to treatment at this stage of intervention, but the reality is that care coordination can be very complex and looks different across the state depending on the resources available and the partnerships in place in the community. By defining "deflection process," HB 1425 offers some structure to local care coordination processes where deflection efforts are already happening and aims to prevent people who need treatment and follow-up care from slipping through the cracks after their first interaction with law enforcement or first responders.

HB 1425 also supports prosecutors in monitoring people that they have selected to participate in diversion programming. As a person in recovery, I will be the first to tell you that recovery is an impossible journey to embark on alone. Even when you are ready to make a change, the barriers and stigma that exist make that a challenge, and that's where community support truly becomes critical. In my nearly 17 years in long-term recovery, I have had the privilege of meeting thousands of others who have found the joy that recovery can bring. However, I have yet to meet a single person in meaningful recovery that has done it alone.

The pilot program in this bill helps prosecutors collaborate with local community navigators to assist participants in getting to their appointments and completing their treatment. This policy is not about being soft on people who have committed dangerous crimes – those are not the people we’re talking about with this policy. This is about giving someone who needs help the right support system to help them address their struggles before those struggles take over their lives.

The final aspect of this bill that our administration supports is evaluating the pretrial services program. This is a logical step that will help our state understand the program's outcomes so we can make better decisions about program improvements.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the key components I’ve highlighted in this bill are not new ideas for North Dakotans, nor do they change the way we are currently approaching recovery and reentry in our state. This bill turns our attention to the very beginning of the criminal justice system, where community recovery and reentry efforts are already taking place, and it offers another layer of support to those efforts. The Governor said himself that this administration backs policy efforts that move “addiction and recovery resources upstream – investing in diversion and deflection programs on the front end of the justice system” to save taxpayers money and keep our communities safe. HB 1425 does exactly that.

Thank you for your time. Our administration urges a “do pass” recommendation on HB 1425 and I will stand for any questions the committee has.