

HB 1549
Commissioner Jonathan Holth
Senate Judiciary Committee
Senator Diane Larson, Chair
March 19th, 2025 Peace Garden Room

Good afternoon, 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. I am here today on behalf of the Armstrong administration to testify in support of HB 1549, the final bill in Representative Klemin's reentry package, which was born from an interim study process that included partners spanning across our state's criminal justice system.

Before getting into the details of this bill, I want to return to a point that I made in my testimony on HB 1425. The roads to recovery and reentry are ones that *should not be traveled alone*. People on their journey in reentry and recovery need support more than ever – especially if they are walking into a community that they've been removed from for weeks, months, or potentially years following a jail or prison stay. HB 1549 is all about strengthening collaboration to make sure that people have the support that they need to transition to the community **and stay there**.

To ensure those on their recovery or reentry journey are set up for successful reentry, we have to think about the barriers that individuals will likely experience long before they are released from custody and return to their community. HB 1549 aims to improve reentry outcomes by strengthening the collaboration between state agencies to set people up with medical coverage and state-issued identification before they leave prison. It may not seem like much, but if anyone here participated in the reentry simulation a couple of months ago, you know that folks leaving prison face a multitude of barriers. This bill is about the common sense ways we can remove red tape to help people focus on what comes next – their recovery, their families, their jobs, and their communities. A personal note on this particular issue.....I've been a small business owner for 20 years, and I've always been proud to be a second-chance employer and a recovery-friendly employer. We've employed a number of people at our businesses right after they are released from custody. Many of them have come to our restaurants to apply for jobs, and don't have a state-issued ID card that is necessary for the hiring process. I have personally driven multiple people to the drivers license office and paid for them to get an ID just so they can legally begin their employment journey. This is a barrier that doesn't need to exist, and one that this bill eliminates.

North Dakota's justice system is designed to hold people accountable- and nothing in this bill says otherwise- but it is also meant to help them leave better than when they entered. Programming in jails and prisons can help offenders cultivate skills necessary to help them join the workforce, become better parents, cope with mental illness or addiction, and more. HB 1549 references two policies that help with this, both of which are being absorbed into DOCR's budget bill (SB 2015). One provision creates a funding opportunity for local jails to receive assistance in implementing rehabilitative programs, and the other supports collaboration between DOCR and North Dakota's five tribes in developing a program for Native Americans in DOCR custody. We want people to successfully return home, and tailored reentry programs can help us achieve that goal.

Other aspects of HB 1549 that just make sense include studying record sealing practices to see if there are ways to automate our system and improving our criminal justice data collection and sharing practices to help us make the most informed decisions about people who are in state and local custody.

Committee members, as you know, approximately 95% of people who leave our prisons will become our neighbors again, and many will be walking out the door in need of treatment services, housing, and other forms of support to help them along the road to recovery. To quote Governor Armstrong, “we must take an all-of-government approach to the challenges of addiction and behavioral health.” HB 1549, in combination with HB 1417 and HB 1425, represents this all-hands-on-deck approach to recovery and reentry that North Dakotans not only need, but deserve.

In closing, we recommend a “do pass” vote on HB 1549, and I thank you for your time today. I am happy to stand for any questions the committee may have.