

HB 1281

Good morning Chair Weisz and members of the Human Services committee,

My name is Kara Gloe. I am a mental health therapist licensed in both North Dakota and Minnesota. I work at Canopy Medical Clinic. Among the primary populations of people I serve, are folks living with HIV/AIDS in North Dakota. As such, I am here today to talk about the important implications a bill like this could have on the mental health of people living with HIV/AIDS and the potential ripple effect it could have on public health overall.

The law, as it currently stands, is inherently discriminatory and helps codify the stigma faced by people living with HIV/AIDS. Beyond the logistics of how one could ever prove who transmitted what to whom, the same kinds of laws do not exist for herpes, hepatitis, or other STIs for which there is no cure. Further, considering there has never been a single charge or conviction under this law, it is a solution to a problem North Dakota does not have and never has. Frankly, it does more harm than good.

In my time serving people living with HIV/AIDS, I have yet to see a client who has not, on some level, discussed the difficulties the stigma of having HIV/AIDS has had on their lives. For many people, the idea that someone could discover their status without their consent is a fear that runs on a near constant loop in the back of their minds. Some folks can manage this fear and live highly productive lives. In these cases, the stigma is only minimally limiting, but still limiting. However, for so many, it is or has been the reason they are isolated, stuck in unhealthy relationships, suffer from substance use disorder, etc. For so many, it is a major contributing factor to their depression, anxiety and/or has caused or contributed to their trauma. It is the reason they stopped attending church or have lost their community. It feels like a deep dark secret they carry around on their backs, because they have experienced shame, shunning, and rejection when they have attempted the type of vulnerability it takes to share this part of themselves with others. They worry about their jobs – whether to disclose, when to disclose and to whom. Will they be fired? Will they be forced to quit due to mistreatment? They worry about housing. Will they be evicted? They worry about how they will be treated in medical settings. Can they really trust medical professionals to protect their confidentiality? Will they be treated with dignity and respect? Unfortunately, for most of my clients they cannot depend on a consistent answer to any of these questions. I have heard absolutely devastating stories about how the ignorance of others plagues my clients, either as thousands of tiny little paper cuts or as full frontal emotional and psychological assaults.

While medical advances take us farther and farther away from the AIDS epidemic of the 80s, beliefs, education, and awareness lag far behind. I doubt I have to tell anyone on the Human Services committee that mental healthcare is healthcare. When people have access to the resources they need to heal their trauma and to develop coping skills for thriving, instead of just surviving, everyone benefits. Removing barriers to good mental health is an investment in public health. HIV is no longer considered a terminal illness, but rather a manageable long-term disease not unlike diabetes. Today, in this moment, you have an opportunity to help reduce stigma for people living with HIV/AIDS in North Dakota. You have the ability to lighten their load. As someone who works with people living with HIV/AIDS in one-on-one settings and via a peer support program, which includes group support, I can tell you these folks deserve to thrive. They are valuable contributors to their families and communities, and they absolutely deserve equal treatment under the law. Today, in this moment, you have the opportunity to send the message that the State of North Dakota agrees.

I hope my clients, all people living with HIV/AIDS in North Dakota, and I can count on your support to decriminalize HIV, so these folks have one less barrier to living a long healthy productive life full of the joy and happiness we all deserve.