

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman Elkin, and members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Lindsey Burkhardt, and I am offering this testimony not in representation of any organization or group, but as a private citizen of North Dakota and a mother of three young children.

My professional history includes serving as the Director of the SENDCAA Head Start Program, Victim Services for victims of juvenile criminal cases, and a Family Strengthening Specialist for New Americans. Teachers & childcare providers have a unique responsibility to protect children, but far too often abuse and neglect goes unreported or is covered up. Child abuse – and particularly child sexual abuse – is a significant and particularly destructive problem. As a mother of a 2-, 5-, and 7-year-old, this bill is something I find necessary.

Mandated reporter training creates accountability for educators because mistreatment can occur at school and at home, mandatory reporting establishes accountability for educators and allows them to ensure all students receive acceptable care and treatment while at school. To ensure that my daughters remain safe while at school & at daycare... this bill is vital.

In the media, there are many reports of educator sexual misconduct across North Dakota. It is estimated that one in ten American students will experience sexual misconduct by a school employee by the time they graduate from high school. We can equip educators with the ability to spot signs of abuse but mandating this annual training and providing additional ongoing training to keep students safe.

Throughout the last few years in North Dakota the headlines have read:

- “A woman who ran a daycare in a remote part of western North Dakota has been charged with horrific acts of child abuse”
- “A south Fargo daycare provider has recently been shut down after being charged with child neglect”
- “5-Month-Old Baby Left With Permanent Brain Damage After Daycare Provider Allegedly Shakes Her”
- “Bismarck Daycare Provider Found Guilty of Child Abuse”

By requiring annual training—abusers who work within licensed childcare facilities will know their colleagues are well-educated and equipped to spot the

signs of abuse.

I dedicated several years to the Head Start program. Head Start is a federally funded program, and mandates annual training for all staff on being a mandated reporter. Though we had several requirements with little time, Mandated Reporter training was not something that was hard to incorporate into our program training plan. The training we utilized is accessible on the Prevent Child Abuse ND website, it's free, and it takes less than one hour to complete. Teachers in our program were given a timeline to complete the training (within 30 days of the first day of school) and were required to submit a completion certificate to their supervisor to ensure compliance with the federal mandate.

Research suggests that the top two reasons why teachers underreport are (1) lack of knowledge about the signs and symptoms of abuse and (2) fear of making inaccurate reports—so educator training is essential. Research indicates that adult training and education is one of the most effective ways to prevent child abuse. Studies suggest that training on child abuse of all types increases identification and reporting by teachers.

Many children across North Dakota spend 5-days a week at school or in childcare facilities. By mandating this training, our educators will be prepared to take the action needed to protect children. Educators and childcare providers are the eyes that see our children on the most regular basis. It would be wonderful to require all mandated reporters to have this training, however, educators and childcare providers see children regularly—whereas a doctor or dentist may only see a child annually or every 6 months. Educators are truly the front lines to protecting children who are being abused.

Annual mandated reporter training will provide educators and childcare providers with the knowledge and skills to help them carry out their responsibilities. Understanding the signs of child abuse and knowing how to make a report are crucial for stopping child abuse in North Dakota. Which is why annual mandated reporting training is so critical. **Annual** training is not impossible, nor is it asking too much. Our children's safety is worth the hour-long yearly training. North Dakota requires mandated reporting and carries penalties for failing to do so. Providing comprehensive and thorough training for mandated reporters is crucial to help them understand and carry out their legal requirements. For this reason alone, the training should be conducted annually. It is imperative that adults who are entrusted to spend time with or care for our

children have the resources to understand how to recognize signs of abuse so that they may serve as the voice for children who often can't speak up for themselves.

We can all agree that one abused child is too many. It takes a village to raise & protect our children. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are safe in all environments. Mandated reporter training is good for children, families, and the future of communities.

Thank you for your time & consideration of HB 1144.

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