

Testimony in opposition of SB 2384

Relating to prohibiting the use of vaccines developed using messenger ribonucleic acid technology in the state; and to provide a penalty.

Senate Human Services Fort Lincoln Room

Senator Lee and committee members. My name is Stephen McDonough. I have been asked by a resident of Emmons County, who shall remain anonymous, to provide testimony on this terrible bill.

I am a board certified pediatrician who worked in North Dakota for forty years, from 1980 to 2020. I worked at the NDDoH from 1985 to 2000 and served at times as the State Epidemiologist, AIDS/Project Director, Director of Maternal and Child Health and Chief Medical Officer. During the 1980s and 1990s, North Dakota had one of the best immunization programs in the country and was one of a handful of states to escape measles cases during the national measles outbreak of 1989 to 1990¹ and was the first state to eradicate Haemophilus influenzae type b infection known as Hib, the most common cause of childhood meningitis at the time.²

For those of you who are interested in facts, science and truth, I would like to provide some information.

- North Dakota experienced the highest COVID death rate in the United States for nearly two months, 57 consecutive days from September 21 to November 16, 2020.
- North Dakota had the highest death rate in the world from September 29 to November 16, 2020 with the exception of October 20-26 (Andorra) and October 28 to November 2 (Czechia) or 37 of 49 days.
- At the end of the 2-year COVID pandemic in March 2022, 16 (30.2%) of North Dakota's 53 counties had a cumulative COVID death rate greater than that of New York City and 33 (62.3%) had cumulative death rates greater than the national rate of 289 per 100,000.
- A resident of one of North Dakota's 39 rural counties was 60 percent more likely to have been admitted to a hospital for COVID and twice as likely to have died of COVID during the 2-year pandemic as a resident of Cass County, the most urban county in the state. **COVID WAS TERRIBLE IN RURAL NORTH DAKOTA!**
- Seventy-nine percent of North Dakota's 215 long-term care facilities experienced a COVID outbreak. This resulted in the highest long-term care resident case rates, death rates, staff infection rates and rates of staff shortages in the United States (US) for many weeks in the fall of 2020.
- By the end of 2020, North Dakota's long-term care resident death rate was more than twice the national rate.
- North Dakota recorded the highest number of deaths in the state's history in 2020 with 7938 or 1649 (20.8%) more than expected.

¹ Centers for Disease Control. Measles- United States, 1989 and First 20 weeks 1990. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 39:353-393 June 1, 1990

² Bisgard KM, Kao A, Leake J, Strebler PM, Perkins BA and Wharton M. Haemophilus influenzae Invasive Disease in the United States, 1994-1995: Near Disappearance of a Vaccine-preventable Childhood Disease. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 4:229- 237, 1998 April-June

Why did this happen? Because our state had among the worst masking and social distancing in the US during the summer and fall of 2020 and because of unique features that made rural North Dakota open season for the COVID virus.

The carnage in North Dakota peaked in November 2020 when 500 residents died, an average of 16.7 per day and 1191 North Dakota residents were admitted to a hospital for treatment of COVID infection, an average of 39.7 a day. North Dakota received national and international attention for the highest death rate in the world and was ridiculed as “North DaCOVID.” Tragically, a total of 320 North Dakota residents in long-term care died from COVID in November, an average of ten a day for the entire month.

Now how about Emmons County? I provided a monthly pediatric clinic in Linton in Emmons County from 2017 to the end of 2020. I was there in September 2020 when I heard that there were three 500-person weddings going on that month in the area and people weren’t wearing masks. By the end of September, Emmons County had the greatest COVID outbreak in the US.³ The Washington Post interviewed the Emmons County Health Officer “We have people we are not able to get to a higher level of care, and honestly, it’s a horrible feeling,” Newton said. “We have failed to do the things that prevented us from being here.”⁴ The Strasburg Nursing Home experienced an outbreak that resulted in the deaths of 6 residents in the month of October 2020.

Here are some Emmons County facts:

- As of March 10, 2022 Emmons County had 728 cases, 78 hospitalizations with a cumulative hospitalization rate of 2406.7 compared to a state rate of 1029.2 and 18 deaths with a cumulative death rate of 555.4 compared to a state rate of 291.2 and a national rate of 289 per 100,000.
- A resident of Emmons County was 92.2 percent more likely to die of COVID than the national average during the 2020-22 pandemic.
- The county’s complete primary COVID immunization rate was 33.8% compared to the North Dakota average of 54.5% and US rate of 65.1%.
- Emmons County was one of 16 North Dakota counties with a cumulative COVID death rate greater than New York City during the 2-year pandemic.
- Residents of Emmons County were nearly twice as likely to die of COVID as the national average and nearly 2 ½ times to be hospitalized as the state average.

On August 11, 2022 which is the last day that I have county data for deaths and hospitalizations from the NDDoH COVID Dashboard:

- Emmons County cumulative hospitalization rate of 2406.7 per 100,000 was **HIGHEST** in ND and nearly 3 (2.9) times higher than Cass County’s rate of 824.0 as of August 11, 2022

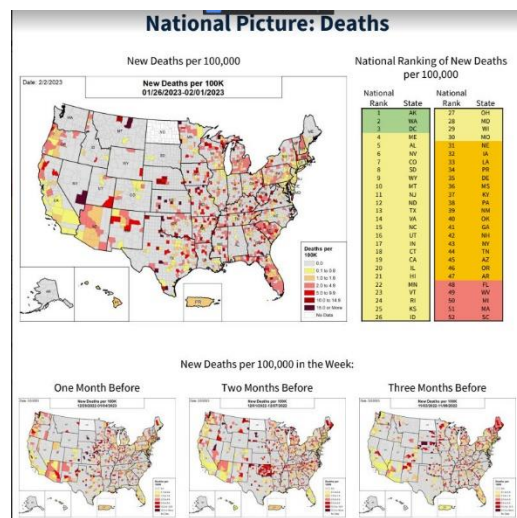
³ Stinchcomb K (September 30, 2020) Health officials in Emmons County are urging North Dakotans to take precautions as cases spike. *KXMB*. <https://www.kxnet.com/news/local-news/health-officials-in-emmons-county-are-urging-north-dakotans-to-take-precautions-as-cases-spike/>

⁴ Gowen A and Bailey H. (2020, November 12). ‘Catastrophic’ lack of hospital beds in Upper Midwest as coronavirus cases surge. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/coronavirus-midwest/2020/11/12/90508b72-250f-11eb-952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html

- Emmons County cumulative death rate of 555.4 per 100,000 was **10th highest** in ND and nearly 3 (2.8) times higher than Cass County's rate of 196.8 as of August 11, 2022

Emmons County	2020	2021	2022	Total
• Cases	376	237	153	766
• Hospitalizations	37	36	5	78
• Deaths	10	6	2	18

It should be noted that many of the COVID cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Emmons County were vaccine preventable in 2021 and 2022. The data for 2022 is incomplete and goes up to August 11, 2022. North Dakota is the **ONLY** state where county death data is not available from the White House COVID-19 Team, Joint Coordination Cell, Data Strategy and Execution Workgroup.



So what are the lessons learned for Emmons County and North Dakota from the COVID pandemic? Prior to immunizations, if you weren't wearing your mask and social distancing, many in your community got sick, got hospitalized and many died. Once immunizations became available, if you didn't get your shots- you could get sick and spread COVID to others and you and your friends could get sick, get hospitalized or die.

So how many North Dakotans died of COVID because they didn't get the vaccine? An analysis by the Brown University School of Public Health estimated that **650 North Dakotans died a vaccine-preventable COVID death by April of 2022.**⁶ Considering that 21 North Dakotans died of influenza in 2019-20,⁷ the number of vaccine preventable COVID deaths was staggering.

⁵ White House COVID-19 Team, Joint Coordination Cell, Data Strategy and Execution Workgroup. North Dakota State Synopsis. February 2, 2023 page 14 <https://healthdata.gov/Community/COVID-19-State-Profile-Report-North-Dakota/8hnt-tgfp>

⁶ Simmons-Duffin S and Nakajima K (2022, May 13). This is how many lives could have been saved with COVID vaccinations in each state. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/05/13/1098071284/this-is-how-many-lives-could-have-been-saved-with-covid-vaccinations-in-each-sta>

⁷ North Dakota Department of Health. Influenza Seasonal Comparison. *NDDoH*. <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/health/influenza/data>

This happened in North Dakota during the delta phase of COVID in the fall of 2021

- Nine of the top ten ND counties (Sheridan, Adams, McLean, Sioux, Mercer, Mountrail, Kidder, Hettinger, and Billings) with highest death rates from August 1- end of December, 2021 had immunization rates lower than ND's average of 52.5% primary COVID immunization complete. North Dakota was 43rd worst in immunizations and 49th worst in mask use in the US.
- Similarly, nine of the top ten ND counties (Sheridan, Grant, Emmons, McLean, Wells, Golden Valley, Morton, Adams, and Mercer) with highest hospitalization rates from August 1 to December 2021 had immunization rates lower than ND's overall rate.

So what did we learn about COVID in 2021? People living in North Dakota counties with low vaccination rates were more likely to be hospitalized and die of COVID.

The mRNA COVID vaccines are very safe and very effective in preventing hospitalizations and deaths from COVID. The mRNA vaccines COVID (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna) vaccines are the most widely used COVID immunizations. COVID immunizations in the US by December 2022 had total more than 655 million doses — 80 percent of the population had received at least one dose — with the cumulative effect of preventing more than 18 million additional hospitalizations and more than 3 million additional deaths.⁸

Now to this horrific and terrible piece of legislation authored by a representative from a county with the greatest cumulative COVID hospitalization rate in the state and with a death rate nearly **THREE TIMES** that of our most urban county. This bill would prevent North Dakotans from protecting themselves from COVID now and in the future and would prevent our residents from protecting themselves from future pandemics from other viruses where mRNA vaccines would be protective.

There are too many legislators that have learned nothing from the pandemic. The anti-science crowd spews misinformation on the effectiveness of masks and vaccines which just results in more illness, hospitalizations and death. No lie is too outrageous for them. They have abandoned truth and reason and wish to inflict upon all of us their anti-science ideology.

SB 2374 needs to vigorously opposed and soundly defeated!

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Author of "The Golden Ounce: A Century of Public Health in North Dakota" 1989

⁸ Meagan C. Fitzpatrick et al., "Two Years of U.S. COVID-19 Vaccines Have Prevented Millions of Hospitalizations and Deaths," To the Point (blog), *Commonwealth Fund*, Dec. 13, 2022.