



Chair Larson and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Taylor Sorensen, and I am the Director of Domestic Violence Intervention at the Community Violence Intervention Center in Grand Forks, North Dakota. I am one of (9) program providers in North Dakota and I am also a member of the North Dakota Alliance to End Partner Abuse. This alliance has had many conversations about the language and gaps in domestic violence intervention programming across the state. I am here today (virtually) to share my support for House Bill 1269 regarding the proposed amendment to North Dakota Century Code 12.1-17-13.

I have been providing domestic violence intervention programming since 2017. Currently, North Dakota requires that individuals charged with domestic violence, must complete an evaluation and treatment program. This language assumes that domestic violence is a disease and is treatable. However, domestic violence is a choice and takes purposeful interventions to address the beliefs behind the use of violence.

The current language has medical connotations similar to chemical dependency treatment. This also puts the responsibility on the program providers to “determine appropriateness,” as individuals ordered to complete the evaluation assume that we will diagnose them with being abusive or not.

This is not the purpose of our “evaluations”, or as some of us call them assessments or intakes. The purpose is to gather information regarding the participant’s self-reported history of violence and/or abuse, mental disorders and/or substance usage, behaviors that may or may not have occurred in their relationships, and their beliefs behind power and control. We recognize that many individuals may not self-disclose the violence they have used, so as a program provider, we rely heavily on court findings and orders.

The words “programming” and “assessment” more accurately describe the model used by groups for individuals who have used violence. The interventions are provided by trained individuals who provide evidence-based opportunities for group psychoeducation and dialogue.

There are charges being proposed to be added to the NDCC as well. I am not an attorney, so I cannot speak on behalf of the justice system. I can, however, speak as a provider and share that we have seen missed opportunities for intervention. We do not want people who commit domestic violence to fall through the cracks just because a crime isn’t named specifically in the statute, and the earlier we can intervene and get individuals into programming before these become lifelong patterns, the better.

Addressing domestic violence isn’t just a court issue, it is a community issue. Our local Community Coordinated Response here in Grand Forks, North Dakota, tracks those who complete domestic violence intervention programming and have seen a significant decrease in 911 calls to their homes as well as less protection orders being placed against them.

Our goal as domestic violence intervention providers is to offer an opportunity for the individual who is causing harm to address their behaviors and make new choices in the future. Programming is not only for the participant, but also for the survivor/victim, their families, and their community. We do this work for the hope that they no longer cause harm to those they say they love. This is only possible if those who are causing harm are mandated to take the opportunity.

From what I have learned in the past 6 years, by the time they are mandated for intervention, this isn't the first time they have harmed those in their lives. If we can provide programming at the first signs of domestic violence, we have the opportunity to prevent serious harm to those in our community and change patterns of behavior before they become deeply embedded.

As one of our clients stated, "This program has changed my life, and made me realize the proper way to love a person is not stemmed in violence but in kindness. Anger, hatred, and all those negative emotions will change a person into something they don't want to be, but changing for the better is not impossible, you just have to be willing to make the effort to change it."

And opportunities for change can only occur if we continue to support (through legislative changes and funding) those who provide this essential work.

I am honored to have shared with you all today and am open to any questions you may have.