



# MCKENZIE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

1201 12th St SE Ste B • Watford City, ND 58854

Matthew Johansen, Sheriff

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Testimony Prepared for the

House Appropriations Committee/Human Resources Division

February 4, 2025

By: Matthew Johansen, McKenzie County Sheriff

Re: HB 1012

Dear Chairman Nelson and Members of the House Appropriations Committee/HR Division,

My name is Matthew Johansen, McKenzie County Sheriff, and I am here today to support HB 1012.

As a community, we face significant challenges when it comes to providing crisis care for individuals actively in crisis within McKenzie County. The resources available are exceedingly sparse, with the McKenzie County Hospital lacking on-site psychiatric care and no 24-hour crisis care locations in existence. Additionally, all in-patient crisis care facilities are located outside of McKenzie County.

## Current State of Crisis Care in McKenzie County

- **Limited Facilities:** There are no local facilities providing inpatient crisis care, necessitating transportation of individuals in crisis to locations outside McKenzie County.
- **High Volume of Calls:** In 2023, the McKenzie County Sheriff's Office responded to 49 calls originating as suicide threats, with a similar number (48) in 2024. This does not account for incidents where threats of suicide evolved from other calls.
- **Committal Transports:**
  - In 2023, the Sheriff's Office completed 46 committal transports, with deputies traveling 5,888 miles, including 12 emergency committals issued by a physician.
  - In 2024, the total committal transports were 39, covering 16,490 miles, with 31 emergency committals issued by a physician, indicating an increased burden on deputies.

## Challenges in Crisis Response

- **Initial Response:** Deputies must determine the nature of the incident and decide, often without immediate physician support, whether the person should be brought to the





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emergency room. This process involves gathering facts and evidence surrounding the crisis.

- **Physician Consultation:** The emergency room physician then confers with a psychiatric physician from another facility to determine if an emergency committal is necessary, a process that can take hours and frustrate the individual in crisis.

## Benefits of AVEL eCare

- **Comfortable Crisis Resolution:** Individuals in crisis are more willing to open up in familiar surroundings. AVEL eCare allows deputies to offer the opportunity for the individual to speak with a mental health professional via video chat in their current, comfortable location.
- **Visible Assessment:** Video chat enables professionals to visibly assess the patient's demeanor and accurately evaluate their condition, versus solely relying on audible assessments.
- **Enhanced Decision Making:** Deputies retain authority in decision-making, considering the professional's recommendations while assessing the viability of the patient remaining in place.
- **Follow-Up Resources:** Introduction of follow-up through Human Services ensures that patients receive additional resources and support post-crisis, a system that did not exist before AVEL eCare.
- **Efficiency in Staffing:** If a decision is made for the patient to remain in place, deputies can return to other calls for service more quickly, rather than waiting in an emergency room.

## Endorsement of AVEL eCare's Crisis Care Program

In today's world, law enforcement agencies are increasingly being called upon to respond to mental health and substance abuse crises. While officers and deputies are dedicated to serving their communities and genuinely want to help, they often lack the clinical training necessary to effectively assess and support individuals in crisis. This is where Avel eCare's Crisis Care program makes a transformative difference.

Since the McKenzie County Sheriff's Office implemented the program in March of 2024, we have utilized it multiple times and it has saved countless trips to the local emergency room and mental health facilities across the state. Avel eCare's innovative virtual co-responder program has been a game-changer for McKenzie County. By providing 24/7 access to behavioral health professionals, this program bridges the gap between immediate crisis response and professional mental health care. Utilizing cellular-enabled tablets, behavioral health professionals can connect





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with law enforcement officers on the scene, assisting with de-escalation, stabilization, and safety assessments during crisis situations—whether on the side of the road or in a living room.

What truly sets Avel eCare's Crisis Care program apart is its comprehensive approach. The support does not end after the initial crisis response. Instead, the program ensures that individuals who were in crisis are seamlessly connected to local mental health resources for follow-up care. This continuity of care is essential in fostering long-term recovery and stability for those affected by mental health crises.

I wholeheartedly endorse Avel eCare's Crisis Care program for its dedication to improving outcomes for individuals in crisis and its unwavering support for law enforcement officers. This program is a testament to the power of innovative solutions in addressing critical gaps in our mental health and public safety systems.

I respectfully request that funding is maintained for this program now and in the future.

Thank you.

Matthew Johansen

McKenzie County Sheriff

