



NORTH DAKOTA

Family Alliance LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1456

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North Dakota Family Alliance Legislative Action
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Chairman Heinert and honorable members of the House Education Committee,

North Dakota Family Alliance Legislative Action would like to testify in favor of House Bill 1456 and respectfully request that you render a “DO PASS” on this bill.

Over the last decade, it has been well documented that young people have experienced higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health issues.¹ There needs to be a sufficient answer and response to these problems; they are not to be taken lightly.

Chaplains are perfectly equipped to handle situations where the children in these schools can come to them and talk about their issues. Chaplains can be a fantastic resource for people in need. When I saw this bill, it gave me a great opportunity to reach out to the chaplain who served the college football team I played on to talk about what a chaplain does.

He told me that pastoral counseling through a situation isn't really a sermon. A chaplain doesn't tell a child to repent and be baptized if they are struggling with something. A chaplain would help a child frame a solution to a situation based on the resources they already have. They help someone along rather than tell them what to do and to believe in what the chaplain believes in.

If someone came to a chaplain and asked for spiritual guidance, and the chaplain does not hold the same religious beliefs as that child (i.e. a Muslim child asks for guidance from a Catholic chaplain), they would not tell the child that they were wrong. They would help that child find a person who could best help their situation.

The National School Chaplains Association sums up why this is so important in this era where our young people are struggling. “Chaplains exist at the complex intersection of spirituality and

¹ Shaughnessy, A. F., & Turner, M. A. (2023). Depression and anxiety among U.S. children and young adults: Trends over a decade. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(1), e232485.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.2485>

Pew Research Center. (2023, March 3). Youth suicide risk increased over past decade. *Pew Charitable Trusts*. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/03/03/youth-suicide-risk-increased-over-past-decade>

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mental health, where the line between a spiritual crisis and a mental health crisis is not always clear even to the person experiencing it. School chaplains are not therapists; in fact, schools employing chaplains stress that they are only one part of a holistic health and wellness approach. They are a nonjudgmental confidant easy to talk to without fear of harassment, and guided by their training, help decide when to refer someone to a licensed therapist.”²

This is an opportunity for schools across our state to create and supplement mental health personnel in schools. As I stated earlier, this is a need for children across our nation that desperately needs to be met. We ought to give every resource we possibly can to this age group that is crying out for help. Counselors and chaplains can do this together beautifully.

We have chaplains for many different things in the United States. The military, hospitals, the department of corrections, police, firefighters, EMS, higher education facilities, sports teams, and many others all have chaplains. Why not our kids?

We ought to give kids in North Dakota the best opportunity to have stability in their mental health by adding the listening ear of chaplains in schools. Because of this reason, North Dakota Family Alliance Legislative Action respectfully requests that you render a “DO PASS” on House Bill 1456.

Thank you for taking the time to read our testimony. Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions.

Sincerely,

Jacob Thomsen
Policy Analyst
North Dakota Family Alliance Legislative Action

² National School Chaplain Association. (n.d.). *The benefits of school chaplaincy*. National School Chaplain Association. <https://www.nationalschoolchaplainassociation.org/school-benefits>