

Good afternoon Chairman Ruby and members of the Human Service Committee.

My name is SaVanna Schmidt. I am testifying in support of HB 1205 as a foster parent, and the adoptive mother of a Safe Haven Baby.

Babies are surrendered for Safe Haven here in North Dakota more often than people realize. There are many different unfortunate scenarios where a mother may suddenly find herself needing to take advantage of the Safe Haven Law. The Safe Haven Baby Box ensures a safe place for the baby, and a contactless surrender for the mother. In sensitive, difficult, and possibly dangerous situations, mothers may prefer to avoid contact with the staff members of an approved location. Without the Safe Haven Baby Box, a mother has no legal way to surrender her baby under the Safe Haven law without dealing directly with staff.

I have some examples to share with you today that highlight how the use of a Safe Haven Baby Box could have eliminated some complications in the following stories.

My husband and I adopted our daughter in 2020, but she was born in 2018. Safe Haven babies can usually be adopted shortly after a 6 month residency period. But this child was in foster care for over two years, and that could have been prevented with more awareness around Safe Haven procedure or with a Safe Haven Baby Box.

Her mother had delivered her at home, then traveled around a hundred miles to Bismarck to surrender her at a hospital here. Unfortunately, the mother's travel companion gave the mother's name to the hospital during the surrender. Possibly due to the lack of education around Safe Haven procedure, the hospital made the mistake of putting the mother's name on the baby's birth certificate. This created an issue for the baby's Safe Haven status, and the case was tied up in court for over two years.

So why did the mother travel a hundred miles to surrender her baby? Because a few years earlier, she had been detained while trying to surrender a baby near her hometown. Even though she was surrendering at a legal location, it was initially misunderstood to be abandonment.

Education, training, and awareness are necessary to make our Safe Haven law effective, and I was pleased to see that this bill provides for some of that. Safe Haven laws are designed to protect women in crisis, as well as their babies, but lack of awareness and training can result in not only unsafe abandonment and tragedy, but also unnecessary hardship for mothers or the surrendered children. In addition to awareness of the law, Safe Haven Baby Boxes give desperate mothers the essential option for a legal, contactless surrender.

The Safe Haven Baby Boxes paired with the awareness campaign proposed in this bill will save lives. Our Safe Haven baby is six years old today. She is beautiful, precocious and thriving, and the world is better because she is here.

Thank you for your attention.

