

HB 1464

House Human Services

February 3, 2025 | 9:00 am

Good morning, Chairman Ruby and members of the House Human Services Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1464. I'm testifying today as a mother who would have benefited greatly from doula support. I'm also testifying as a doula who came to this field because of the struggles I faced after giving birth to my daughter.

In the fall of 2010, I was shopping at Target with my new husband Chris. I had been feeling off all morning and as we shopped for toiletries, I wondered out loud, "Maybe I should take a pregnancy test..." We hadn't been shy about our intentions to start a family quickly, so pregnancy wasn't out of the realm of possibility, and once the question had been uttered, we couldn't leave without testing. In a stall of the women's restroom, I cried watching the pink lines develop. We were ecstatic. I dumped the rest of my iced latte, and we bought a few onesies, marveling at how tiny and perfect they were.

About eight months later, when I went into labor, we were nervous but excited, certain that the childbirth classes we had taken and all our experiences with our nieces and nephews would prepare us for what was to come. Unfortunately, our optimism was challenged and degraded multiple times over the next forty-some hours as I hit physical and mental barriers I could never have imagined. In the soft fluorescence of our hospital room, feeling battered after an emergency Cesarean section and exhausted after spending multiple days in labor, I held my tiny, jaundiced daughter and cried. Unlike the tears I spilled on the floor of the Target bathroom, these were hot with shame and fear and guilt. I already felt like I had failed. Despite the kindness and support offered by the hospital staff, I carried those negative feelings back to our home.

We continued to struggle in this new phase of our lives. I underwent radiation therapy as a teenager to treat cancer, which saved my life but left me unable to produce enough breastmilk to feed my baby. Her jaundice worsened and she required additional medical treatment. My husband tried his best to help me, but this was uncharted territory for both of us. Our families lived far away and, though I know now they would have welcomed my questions, validated my efforts, and given me the love I desperately needed, I heard a tiny, nasty voice tell me that it was bad enough I couldn't give my baby what she needed – the last thing I should do was burden everyone else with the things that I couldn't handle.

It wasn't until my daughter was about nine months old that I began to feel the veil lift, when I realized that what I'd been feeling wasn't just my "new normal" as a parent, but severe and all-encompassing postpartum depression. It affected how I bonded with my daughter, the baby we had wished for. It affected the new marriage between myself and my husband. It made me feel inadequate, monstrous; my husband felt alienated and ineffective.

I became a doula here in Bismarck six years ago, nearly to the day, because I will never forget the depths and darkness of the first months of my daughter's life, never forget my brain whispering poison during late-night feedings. I didn't want any other new parent to experience anything like what I had gone through. Unfortunately, many, many new parents do experience postpartum experiences that color their perceptions of their babies, their partners, and themselves – 25% of mothers experience depressive symptoms even up to three years post-childbirth. Postpartum doulas can help families in this time of adjustment, easing stress and providing emotional, physical, and tangible support. We also know that with a doula, women are more likely to attend their medical appointments in the postpartum period. This is so important in North Dakota, where physicians see patients falling off the map and not getting the services they need, like depression and anxiety screenings.

HB 1464 will make it easier for families who may otherwise not be able to afford doula services to benefit from having a postpartum doula. If we want to create a world where children are welcomed wholeheartedly, where parents are supported and can start their parenting journey on the right foot, we need to create that system of support. Passing HB 1464 will show North Dakota's commitment to being family friendly – a place where new parents can have a legendary start.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.

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