

TESTIMONY OF

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NORTH DAKOTA CITIZEN & PILOT

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HOUSE BILL NO. 1612

As a committed citizen of North Dakota and a passionate pilot, I stand before you to advocate for the establishment of the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine, as proposed in House Bill No. 1612. Beyond the technical and physical demands of aviation, pilots face significant mental health challenges that often remain unspoken due to stigma and fear of professional repercussions. Sharing real-life stories underscores the critical need for dedicated support systems in our state.

The Silent Struggles of Pilots

Pilots, whether seasoned professionals or aspiring students, often face immense pressures that can impact their mental health. One tragic example that deeply resonates **within our own community** is the story of John Hauser, a University of North Dakota student pilot. In 2021, John lost his life to suicide, a devastating reminder of the silent struggles many in the aviation community endure. John's passing brought national attention to the mental health challenges facing student pilots, highlighting the urgent need for increased awareness, resources, and support systems that prioritize well-being without fear of jeopardizing one's career aspirations.

In October 2023, Joseph Emerson, an experienced Alaska Airlines pilot, faced a severe mental health crisis. While off-duty and traveling as a passenger, Emerson attempted to shut down the plane's engines mid-flight. He later revealed that he had been battling depression and, in an attempt to self-medicate, consumed psychedelic mushrooms, leading to a breakdown. Emerson's case highlights the profound mental health challenges pilots can face and the potential consequences when these issues remain unaddressed.

Similarly, in 2012, JetBlue Flight 191 experienced a harrowing incident when Captain Clayton Osbon suffered a mental breakdown during flight. Exhibiting erratic behavior and incoherent speech, he was subdued by passengers and crew after leaving the cockpit. This event underscores the unpredictable nature of mental health crises and the importance of proactive mental health support for pilots.

Barriers to Seeking Help

A significant barrier preventing pilots from seeking mental health support is the fear of jeopardizing their careers. The stringent regulations surrounding medical certification often discourage open discussions about mental well-being. Pilots worry that disclosing mental health struggles or seeking treatment could lead to suspension or loss of their flying privileges. This

fear fosters a culture of silence, where many choose to suffer in isolation rather than risk their livelihoods.

The Role of the Proposed Center

The North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine can play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by:

- **Providing Confidential Support:** Offering a safe environment where pilots can seek mental health assistance without fear of professional consequences.
- **Advocating for Policy Reform:** Working with regulatory bodies to develop balanced policies that prioritize both safety and the well-being of aviation professionals.
- **Promoting Mental Health Awareness:** Educating the aviation community about the importance of mental health and reducing the associated stigma.

Conclusion

The mental health challenges faced by pilots are profound and multifaceted. Establishing the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine is not just an investment in the health of our aviation professionals but also a commitment to the safety of all who rely on air travel. This initiative will further solidify the University of North Dakota as the premier educational institute for aerospace sciences. It represents an opportunity to drive meaningful change in the aviation industry by fostering a culture that prioritizes health and well-being. Moreover, the center will play a vital role in supporting the next generation of aviation professionals—our students—as they embark on their aerospace career paths, equipping them with the resources and resilience needed for long-term success in this demanding field.

I urge you to support House Bill No. 1612 and take a decisive step toward addressing this critical issue.

Thank you for your consideration.