

TESTIMONY

ANNE HAUSER

January 27, 2025

IN SUPPORT OF A DO PASS HOUSE BILL 1612

Dear Chair Ruby and Members of the House Human Services Committee,

Our son passed away on October 18, 2021 by taking his life.

John, a beloved son and younger brother, was a sophomore at UND majoring in commercial aviation and was a strong student. He was responsible, compassionate, motivated, and had maturity beyond his 19 years. His paternal roots, rural Minnesotan farmers, engrained in him a determined and hard-working nature. Raised in Chicago, John earned his private pilot's license in 2020 and paid for the \$10,000 license himself through working different jobs from the age of 14. John continued to work part time jobs while at UND, contributing to the cost of flight lessons. He was interested in aviation since the age of about 10, and his love of flying continued as he decided to pursue his passion for aviation as a career.

Although we did not know it, John was suffering from what we assume to be depression. We discovered this from the letters he left us and his older sister Grace. Although he met many friends in the aviation program and his UND fraternity, Delta Tau Delta, he described feelings of sadness for which he wanted to get help, but did not feel he could because of concerns of losing his medical certificate and being grounded. He described it as if he were trapped between *"wanting to feel better and losing his license to fly which he loved."* Reading his words broke our hearts.

As we know from national studies, the mental health of young adults (18-25 yrs) has suffered, especially during the pandemic. Per the research, in what Acting Deputy Dr. Debra Houry said was a cry for help, *44% of teens said they felt sad or hopeless and nearly 20% said they had seriously considered suicide.* (Talal Ansari, WSJ March 31, 2022) To think that college aviation students would be excluded from this pool of concerning statistics would be a great mistake.

After our son John's death, we heard from working pilots and from aviation students that this is a problem within the profession. For several reasons pilots and those working in aviation may be at *higher* risk of mental health illnesses—the hours they work, the stressful work environment, increasing demand for travel, furlough risks and the steep cost/debt of becoming a pilot. Students even informed us they are advised by those in the profession *not* to seek counseling as they will then contend with strict and negative FAA regulations once they have a listed mental health condition on their records. They would need a special issuance to fly again. It seems to us that pilots, including student pilots, face the unenviable choice of hiding their condition and keeping it undisclosed, or reporting it, and being grounded indefinitely. Being grounded means lost income and training time. It also adds expense through required FAA psychological testing (costing the pilot thousands of dollars) for special issuances that, if approved, would allow the pilot to return to flying. To be clear, there needs to be rules in place to keep a potentially unstable pilot from flying. But for the majority who are struggling with anxiety, depression and other treatable forms of mental health conditions, the rules and regulations provide a large barrier to seeking care.

Realizing the current difficulties of approaching mental health in aviation, we decided to establish an initiative in John's memory at the University of North Dakota, the John A. Hauser Mental Health in Aviation Initiative Fund. The fund supports raising awareness about mental health conditions, support students to seek appropriate help for mental health concerns, and encourages peer support. We hope to reduce stigma around mental health conditions and educate students on symptoms as well. At UND the fund helped staff a psychologist who has knowledge in both aviation/FAA regulations and counseling. At UND, a peer-to-peer counseling program **UpLift** has also been established which helps aviation students reach out for assistance from their peers anonymously. The Green Bandana project is another student based program that has been established on campus as well. But more work needs to be done.

We also hope to improve the FAA procedures and regulations that govern mental health conditions in pilots and those who work in aviation. The current system unintentionally fosters healthcare avoidance behaviors. A few of the things we hope to see improved:

- **shortening the time the FAA takes for medical cases and** special issuances to be reviewed (currently an immediate 6-month hold, then up to an additional 18 months to 2 years) would *greatly* help. Adding psychiatric staff for this purpose would help. From 1970-2019 there was **one** staff psychiatrist at the FAA reviewing cases. Just one.

- **Funding research on mental health in aviation.** Dr Billy Hoffman MD, a UND graduate, is currently leading research in this area to better understand and reduce barriers to pilots and controllers who seek care for their mental health and to design a framework that better assesses safety risk. Research data will help guide FAA aeromedical regulations.
- **Streamlining the medical process the FAA uses** and making it more transparent would help. Most pilots do not know where they are in the special issuance process or even if their requested records have been received or reviewed.
- **Reduce the requirement of neuropsychiatric assessments** and testing which are very costly and outdated; pilots are required to pay thousands of dollars out of pocket for these tests. **Researching alternative types of accurate, less costly assessments** would help greatly.

We would like to prevent further loss of life and not wait until another tragedy occurs before there is change. Please support **HB # 1612** to create a North Dakota center for aerospace medicine to advance aeromedical research, facilitate aviation research across North Dakota and provide assistance to flight students and aviation professionals to obtain medical certification. We know this important bill will help others, both in and outside of aviation.

Sincerely,

Anne, Alan and Grace Hauser
January 2025