



North Dakota House of Representatives

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COMMITTEES:

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Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be standing in front of the human services committee to introduce House Bill 1612. For the record, my name is Landon Bahl from Grand Forks, I am also proud to represent the great citizens of District 17 in the house.

I stand before you today to bring House Bill 1612. Please note in front of you is a Christmas tree version of this bill with amendments. You will notice one amendment is to reduce the appropriation from two million dollars down to five hundred thousand dollars. This is because we may have another house bill that we can use as a vehicle for this house bill to get fully funded to the two million dollar mark. However, if that bill does not get funded, with this bill having a small appropriation, we would still be able to proceed with the intent and general goals of this house bill, just not to the fullest extent as planned with the two million dollar funding.

House Bill 1612 is a rather short bill but one that comes with tremendous positive implications for the entire State of North Dakota. In short, this bill stands up the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine. The NDCAM would be housed at The University of North Dakota under the John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences, and in coordination with the North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences. I have no doubt that this committee is very familiar with what the North Dakota Center for Rural Health is and what it does for our state. I would liken the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine to act, look and feel very similar to the Center for Rural Health. This is also why House Bill 1612 has a one-time appropriation of \$500,000. The goal is to stand this entity up, and receive the majority of the funding from a separate house bill as I noted above. If this does not work, the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine will need to look elsewhere for additional funding which will pose challenges. Mr. Chairman and committee members, in a few short minutes, you will hear testimony from subject matter experts on exactly what this bill will do to aid in mental health issues in the aerospace industry.

I want to take a moment to invite this committee to reflect. Think back to the first time you went on a vacation, the thrill of seeing the world from above, crossing an ocean to embark on the trip of a lifetime. Imagine a loved one in need of urgent medical care, their injuries so severe that a life flight crew was dispatched to airlift them to the nearest hospital equipped to save their life. Picture the aircraft that protect our skies, safeguarding the freedoms we hold dear here in the United States. Or even think about the last package you received, shipped from across the country or the world, arriving seamlessly at your doorstep.

Every one of these moments, profound, life-changing, or routine, is made possible because of the extraordinary pilots in our country. These skilled professionals don't just connect cities; they connect people, save lives, secure our nation, and keep the world moving. Without them, these experiences and freedoms we take for granted would look entirely different, fundamentally altering how we live our everyday lives.

The aviation industry is one of the most heavily regulated industries. It is meticulously guarded under the FAA's oversight. Yet, I must say, this relentless guarding has, for decades, resulted in profound and far-

reaching negative consequences for countless lives. As a state, we may not have the power to change how the FAA conducts its business, but we *do* have the power to transform the resources and opportunities available to our aviation professionals right here in North Dakota, professionals who underpin an industry we depend on every single day, often without even realizing it.

Perhaps you've never stopped to consider it this way until now. But today, you will hear tragic and heartbreaking stories, stories that are unfolding not just in our state but across the nation. These stories are a call to action, a reminder that while we cannot alter federal systems, we can and must take bold steps to protect, support, and uplift the aviation professionals whose work impacts all of us in immeasurable ways.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, as you know, North Dakota is a beacon of excellence in aviation. At its heart lies the John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences in Grand Forks, the premier aviation academy in the world. We take immense pride in UND for being the largest aviation degree-granting institution globally, supplying our state, our nation, and beyond with the finest, best-trained pilots in the world. But it doesn't stop there. North Dakota is also the hub of unmanned aircraft systems, a vital contributor to the nation's air traffic controllers, individuals who shoulder what many consider the most stressful job in the world to keep our skies safe—and the proud home of two extraordinary Air Force bases and numerous National Guard flight operations.

The aviation industry runs deep in the great State of North Dakota, it's woven into the fabric of who we are. But today, we must confront a reality that no level of training or preparation can fully mitigate: the mental strain faced by aviation professionals, exacerbated by the very systems meant to guide them, such as the FAA. While we recognize that changing federal rules or regulations is a monumental task, we can no longer afford to wait. The time for change is now, and it must start here, with us.

Why now? Because mental health is healthcare. And because the people who keep our skies safe, our nation secure, and our economy moving deserve unimpeded access to resources and professionals who understand the unique challenges of aviation mental health. North Dakota has always led the way in aviation innovation, let us now lead in championing the well-being of the incredible individuals who make it all possible.

For me, this has become a deeply personal mission: to ensure that aviation professionals in our state have the support and resources they need to protect their mental health. No individual should ever feel afraid or ashamed to seek help. In a state that leads the world in aviation, with the best flight schools, the largest UAS hub, unparalleled military bases, and an exceptional Air Guard, we can and must do better. In fact, we have the responsibility to set the standard for the rest of the nation.

I stand before you today not just as an advocate, but as someone who has seen the need for change. I have experienced the heartbreak of losing not one, but two college fraternity brothers far too soon to suicide. Both were extraordinarily successful, deeply admired by all who knew them, and undoubtedly had bright futures ahead. John Hauser was only 19 years old, and Sam McGuire was only 31 years old. Pictures of John and Sam can be seen on the last page of my written testimony. Their losses serve as a constant reminder that mental health struggles do not discriminate, they affect even the strongest, the most accomplished, and the most resilient among us.

If we are to lead in aviation innovation, we must also lead in providing the best mental health resources. We owe it to these professionals to ensure they never feel alone in their struggles. Together, we can honor their commitment and safeguard their well-being.

The pilots I speak of came to our state driven by dreams, passion, and a deep love for the aviation industry. They sought not just a career, but a lifelong journey in the skies, one filled with purpose and promise. Yet, today, we must confront an undeniable truth: the immense pressures imposed by the FAA and the industry as a

whole, coupled with a lack of accessible resources, have created challenges far too heavy for many to bear. I want to take a moment to read this quote from John Hauser to his parents, Anne and Alan, John wrote:

“If there’s anything you could do for me, get the FAA to change their rules on pilots seeking help with their mental health. I know it would change a lot of things for the better and it would help a lot of people out. Love you, John.”

These were John’s last words to his parents found in a note that he had left for them to read after his passing.

If those burdens had been decreased, and if the right resources and support systems had been in place, I firmly believe we would not be here mourning the loss of 19-year-old John Hauser, 31-year-old Sam McGuire, and countless others who shared their dreams. Instead, they would still be with us, soaring under those same blue skies they cherished so dearly. Their absence is a call to action, a reminder that we must do better to protect the lives of those who dedicate themselves to the skies and ensure their dreams do not come at the cost of their well-being.

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Human Services committee, thank you for your time, and I urge this committee to put your favorable do pass recommendation on House Bill 1612. I will stand for any questions.

Regards,
Landon Bahl



Pictured left is John Hauser, a student at UND in 2021. John took his own life on October 18, 2021 while piloting a UND training plane at the young age of 19 years old. Throughout the testimony here today you will learn much more about John Hauser. John was a tremendous 19-year-old pilot who had the entire world of aviation in front of him. Mental health and the worries of seeking help due to the FAA and how that would play out with his future played a big role in his decision to end his young life. Pictured right is another brother, Sam McGuire, an alumni of UND, who at the time was working for Southwest Airlines and I believe had just gotten on as a pilot with Delta Airlines. Many would say that Sam had the best

life, new job with one of the best airline carriers, a beautiful girlfriend whom he was soon going to propose to, a house, and some of the best friends that cared deeply about him. What more could you ask for? Unfortunately, deep down, Sam was asking for so much more, but no one knew. The burden of mental health became too much for Sam, and he unfortunately took his own life on August 18, 2023, at the age of 31 years old.

