



Committee: North Dakota House Human Services

Topic: Establishment of Center for Aerospace Medicine, and Provision of an Appropriation

Organization: Pilot Mental Health Campaign

Chairman Ruby and Vice Chairman Cleary,

On behalf of The Pilot Mental Health Campaign's thousands of members and volunteers, we want to thank the Committee for accepting this testimony in support of HB 1612. The Pilot Mental Health Campaign (PMHC) is a nationwide nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated exclusively to improving mental health care access for America's aviators. We are a young but growing organization, driven in part thanks to the brave leadership of many University of North Dakota aviation alumni, who led the way in destigmatizing mental health in collegiate aviation. Together, we are working to update laws, modernize regulations, and bring our aeromedical system into the 21st century. That's why we're so excited to see North Dakota taking the lead in supporting your aviation community by establishing the North Dakota Center for Aerospace Medicine. This center will fill a much-needed gap in both research and access to care, and position UND as the academic leader in this field.

Mental health is the silent epidemic facing the United States. Anxiety and depression are two of the most prevalent manifestations of mental health disease. According to a variety of major national studies, around one in five adults have confronted anxiety or depression in the last year.<sup>1,2,3</sup> It should be noted these studies do not discriminate based on occupation, or demographic information. Thus, we are left to assume these statistics are representative of the prevalence of mental health issues facing our country's aviation professionals. Take, for example, the University of North Dakota's Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences. In 2022, the school reports headcounts of 26, 20, and 372 for its Unmanned Aircraft Systems, Air Traffic Management, and Commercial Aviation programs, respectively.<sup>4</sup> With the research currently available, five, four, and seventy-four students in each program statistically face anxiety or depression. Factoring in that the current FAA aeromedical system fosters behaviors of healthcare avoidance and non-reporting of mental health conditions out of fear of losing medical certification,<sup>1</sup> aviation professionals are caught in a no-win situation: avoid treatment to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Hoffman, W. R., Aden, J., Barbera, R. D., Mayes, R., Willis, A., Patel, P., & Tvaryanas, A. (2022). Healthcare Avoidance in Aircraft Pilots Due to Concern for Aeromedical Certificate Loss: A Survey of 3765 Pilots. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 64(4), e245–e248. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000002519>

certification, or get help and be grounded indefinitely. Aviation is then faced with another dilemma: do pilots or controllers pose an even greater safety risk by not disclosing any mental health struggles than those who do and treat them? As Dr. Anne Suh-Hauser notes, individuals function every day in every industry while dealing with mild to even moderate anxiety or depression. Why should a pilot not be allowed to fly or an air traffic controller not be allowed to keep our National Airspace System safe while treating a mild and entirely ubiquitous condition?

One answer is lack of data, and therefore understanding around mental health. Ergo, the proposed HB 1612 establishing a Center for Aerospace Medicine is a major step in the right direction. The Pilot Mental Health Campaign supports the passage of this landmark legislation. HB 1612 legitimizes the reality of mental health as a problem facing our country's present and future aviators. It offers support and guidance to those who simply want to feel better while performing in careers for which they have trained and proven themselves more than capable. More research will lead to more accurate data, which should be used to formulate better regulations around mental health. The Pilot Mental Health Campaign urges the North Dakota House Human Services Committee to swiftly pass HB 1612 to make North Dakota the national leader in advancing aerospace medicine. We thank the Committee for accepting this testimony on behalf of pilots in North Dakota and across the nation who are looking for just the kind of leadership North Dakota is proposing.

While the bill before you concerns action at the state level, the issue of pilot mental health is one that leaders across the nation are grappling with. America's top transportation safety watchdog, The National Transportation Safety Board has listed the current approach to mental health in aviation as a risk to our gold standard of aviation safety. NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy summed up: "Let me be clear – the safety risk comes from a culture of silence around mental health, *not* about seeking help. The safety risk comes from a culture of silence...a culture that empowers people to get the care they deserve, to be healthy in mind and in body, *that* will strengthen safety."<sup>2</sup> We could not agree more. The UND Center for Aerospace Medicine will set a new standard for creating that culture of safety.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please reach out to us with any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr213.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7224a1.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>

<sup>4</sup> <https://aero.und.edu/aviation/student-achievement-data.html>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nts.gov/news/events/Pages/Navigating-Mental-Health-in-Aviation.aspx>