

Ladies and Gentlemen of the North Dakota State House of Representatives,

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. I'm grateful that the conversation about mental health in aviation has begun, and I'm honored to contribute. My name is Jack Rodriguez, and I'm a senior at the University of North Dakota, majoring in commercial aviation.

Over the last decade, mental health concerns and diagnoses have skyrocketed, and society has started to focus more on awareness, education, and treatment. Yet, one crucial part of our society remains largely overlooked: aviation and our pilots. Studies show that depression affects 12.6% of airline pilots, while substance abuse impacts anywhere from 8.5% to 15%. Considering there are roughly 100,000 active airline pilots in the U.S., these numbers should be deeply concerning. And this is just a small slice of the broader pilot community. In total, there are over 600,000 licensed pilots in the United States—each of us sharing a passion for flying, but also facing similar struggles when it comes to mental health support.

The process of becoming a certified pilot is an exciting but incredibly demanding journey. In my own experience at the University of North Dakota, the pressure of meeting deadlines is ever-present, as it is in any profession. But what makes aviation unique is that so much of our training is beyond our control. For instance, to earn a private pilot license, one must complete a solo cross-country flight. But to even attempt it, the weather conditions need to be near perfect. Living in North Dakota, where weather can be unpredictable, conditions for such a flight are rare. I know classmates who have waited over a month for just this one task, facing countless cancellations along the way.

This constant uncertainty can take a toll on your morale and motivation. The stress of delays, coupled with the pressure to succeed, can make it easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. While not everyone feels this way, I've personally experienced these challenges. The emotional strain of waiting for conditions to improve has caused significant stress and impacted my mental health. In an attempt to manage, I turned to the university's peer support system, Uplift, but found it lacking in effectiveness. While I appreciate the university's efforts, it's clear that more needs to be done.

Sadly, I've seen firsthand what can happen when the weight of stress and mental battles becomes too much to bear. In October of 2021, I lost my friend and fellow pilot, John Hauser, to suicide. This is why I write to you today—to urge you to take action.

As representatives of the state that's home to one of the best flight schools in the country and a global leader in aviation excellence, you have the power to make a significant difference. Pilots, both young and old, deserve access to the mental health support we need without fear of

judgment or repercussions. My choice of career should not limit my ability to seek help when I need it most.

I urge you to vote yes on Bill 1612. By doing so, you'll be supporting generations of pilots to come and ensuring that we can continue to soar without the added weight of mental health stigma. Thank you.