

Testimony in Support of Shared Parenting

Gabriel J. Benton, Former Lance Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps

Chairperson and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Gabriel Benton. I am a non-custodial father of four children living in Fargo, a disabled Marine Corps veteran, and a strong advocate for the rights of parents and children. I stand before you today in support of shared parenting because the current system in North Dakota is failing families—especially the men and women who have served this country.

As a Marine, I swore an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution and defend the rights of all Americans. Yet, many veterans like myself find ourselves engaged in another battle—one we never expected to fight—simply for the right to be active parents in our children’s lives. Time and time again, veterans face bias in family courts, with our service-related disabilities being used against us to deny joint custody. The same men and women who risked their lives to protect this nation are being treated as second-class parents.

This is not just a legal issue; it is a life-or-death issue. Veteran suicide rates in this country are staggering, and one of the major contributing factors is the trauma of being unjustly separated from our children. The pain of being treated as a visitor in our children's lives—or worse, being completely erased—takes an unbearable toll. I ask this committee: Does North Dakota want to be complicit in policies that further drive veterans toward crisis and even suicide?

Beyond veterans, the broader impact of our custody laws is undeniable. Research consistently shows that children thrive when both parents are actively involved in their lives. Our current laws, which often result in one parent being marginalized, are not only outdated but actively harmful to the well-being of children and families. Shared parenting is not about one parent winning and the other losing—it is about ensuring that children do not lose the love, support, and guidance of both parents.

I urge you to support this legislation to ensure that no veteran—and no parent—is forced to fight an uphill battle just to be present in their child’s life. North Dakota has an opportunity to lead the way in protecting children and families. Please vote in favor of this bill and help restore fairness, dignity, and constitutional rights to all parents, especially those who have sacrificed so much in service to our nation.

Signed,

Gabriel J. Benton

Former Lance Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps