

Re-Entry House Bills
Lt. Governor Michelle Strinden
House Judiciary Committee
Rep. Lawrence Klemin, chair
February 5, 2025
Room 327 B

Good morning, Chair Klemin, and members of the House Judiciary Committee. For the record, my name is Michelle Strinden, Lieutenant Governor for the State of North Dakota. I am here on behalf of the Armstrong administration to speak in support of HB 1425, HB 1417 and HB1549.

Over the interim, I had the opportunity to participate as a member of the Reentry Study Work Group, which laid the groundwork for these three bills that you will hear more about this morning. For over a year, I was at the table with a team of legislators, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and Department of Health and Human Service leaders, court system and county jail experts, and community reentry partners who examined data findings from our state's criminal justice system. This work group discussed the next steps our state can take toward our

longstanding goals of improving public safety through rehabilitation, reentry and recovery.

As this committee is aware, this interim study follows years of progress our state has made to ensure the people who enter our criminal justice system leave the system better than when they entered it. I am proud our state has emerged as a national leader for our commitment to recovery and reentry. When North Dakotans talk about "reentry," we aren't just talking about the process of a person leaving prison; we are talking about everything that happens before prison: coordinated efforts by law enforcement and behavioral health practitioners to respond to crises, addressing addiction and mental illness that contribute to criminal activity, and establishing a system of accountability and care that keeps our communities safe.

Our Work Group kept this in mind as we closely examined our criminal justice system data over the course of several months. It won't surprise anyone to hear our prison population has been growing, pushing our DOCR facilities and some county jails to their maximum capacities. But a finding from this study that stood out to me is that many residents continue to enter our prisons for

drug and alcohol offenses. We also found racial disparities in our system, specifically an overrepresentation of Black and Native American residents in our prisons. These are outcomes the Armstrong administration is committed to improving. Thanks to my fellow Work Group members who spent their summer diving into data, research, and examples of successful strategies from other states, I know we have a strong roadmap to help us get there.

The recommendations across these three bills support local law enforcement and prosecutors in using deflection and diversion practices – effectively interrupting misconduct early and intervening with treatment resources in cases where addiction and mental illness are the root cause. Provisions in these bills will also reduce barriers to reentry faced by people on community supervision; promote culturally responsive programming for people moving through the justice system; and support cross-agency collaboration to help justice-involved people secure medical coverage and state identification. The bottom line is we want to prepare those leaving the justice system to be ready to

join our workforce, become our neighbors, attend our churches, and make our state better.

We have been on the right trajectory with our reentry and recovery focus for the past decade, and the policies included in HB 1425, HB 1417, and HB 1549 are the natural next step to improve public safety for our communities. Our administration urges the committee to support a "do pass" on all three bills. Thank you for your time and I am open to questions.