

HB 1365

House Energy and Natural Resources | February 6, 2025

Katie Fitzsimmons, NDUS Director of Student Affairs

701-328-4109 | katie.fitzsimmons@ndus.edu

Chair Porter and Committee Members, my name is Katie Fitzsimmons and I serve as the Director of Student Affairs for the North Dakota University System. I am representing the System Office and the eleven NDUS campuses in opposition to HB 1588. The bill would allow for the open and concealed carry and possession of a firearm on our campuses. I will focus on several issues in my testimony: current law and State Board Policy regarding firearms; the varied environments on our campuses; and finally, a note on access to lethal means. We are fortunate to have NDUS students, faculty, and administration providing testimony on this bill and HB 1588, so I will leave the campus-specific arguments to them.

Under current law, NDUS institutions are classified as “public gatherings,” where the possession of firearms and dangerous weapons is restricted. As a result, the State Board of Higher Education (SBHE) enacted State Board Policy 916.1 to follow state law, which prohibits the possession of firearms and dangerous weapons in campus buildings owned or operated by the State Board of Higher Education. However, recognizing that there may be necessary exceptions to this general rule, this body passed HB 1279 in 2017 (it created a new subdivision to subsection 2 of section 62.1-02-05, which is deleted in this bill) and the State Board updated Policy 916.1, which now authorizes the Chancellor or institution president to permit a qualifying individual to store a firearm or dangerous weapon in a campus residence provided that certain requirements are met. Additionally, most of our campuses provide secure weapon storage options for our students and students, faculty, staff, and visitors have the ability to store firearms in their personal vehicles that are on public property. At this time, these policies work beautifully for our students, faculty, and staff. As a result, the System Office sees no benefit, and many potential drawbacks, to expanding firearm possession on our campuses.

Our campuses are places where students of all ages go to learn, live, eat, workout, perform, practice, research, connect, and compete. Students sleep on the property and attend events, faculty and staff work all hours. We have highly competent campus police or security to respond to emergencies, and our campuses have cafeterias, swimming pools, theaters, classrooms, labs, and libraries. Most of these spaces are open to the public. When you

compare the happenings of a campus to that of a courthouse, a K-12 school, or a state office building, it is plain to see that we are different animals than other public gathering spaces and thus, I would argue we should be treated differently. This bill does not allow campuses to adjust firearm policies to their unique spaces and events, nor to their staff or resources available. This bill does not account for staff or students who require accommodations to work in a gun-free area, such as our students with veteran status or those who are survivors of domestic violence, nor does it factor the importance that intimidation can play if a student is involved in a student conduct or Title IX case. Let us not forget that the students that are currently enrolled on our campuses have participated in active shooter drills since they were in kindergarten. To now require those students to no longer “say something when they see something” will have impacts on local law enforcement and how they would respond to our campuses. The inflexibility of this proposed bill does not take countless variables into account and would place our campus communities in precarious, dangerous positions.

Finally, the added level of suicide risk this would pose to our campuses is real. The closer proximity to lethal means, the higher the suicide rate. 48% of those that die by suicide decided to take their own lives with less than nineteen minutes of deliberation¹. 62% of suicides in North Dakota happen with the means of a firearm². Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for ages 10-34. Added to that, our on-campus population primarily consists of 18–24-year-olds, who do not have fully formed frontal lobes, and thus, lack full executive function including complex decision making and impulse control. We are far less concerned about homicide or accidental injury on our campuses than we are about access to self-harm. The more time and distance we can place between an individual under stress and a firearm, the more likely we are to save that life.

On behalf of the System Office and the eleven institutions, I respectfully request a Do Not Pass on HB 1365 or an amendment to the bill to add a subsection to NDCC 62.1-02-05(1) adding this designee to prohibited spaces: "Any property owned, leased, or under the control of the North Dakota state board of higher education." Further, to be able to maintain the exceptions we have in place, made possible by 2017’s HB 1279 and SBHE Policy 916.1, we would ask that the deletion of subsection (o) of 62.1-02-05 be reinstated in this bill and amended to read:

¹ Means Matter: *Duration of Suicidal Crisis* <https://means-matter.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/duration/>
² John Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/north-dakota>

- (o) An individual's storage of a firearm or dangerous weapon in a building that is owned, leased, or under the control of the North Dakota state board of higher education, provided:
- (1) The individual resides in the building; and
 - (2) The storage has been consented to by the North Dakota state board of higher education, or its designee.

I thank you for your time and service and stand ready to answer your questions to the best of my ability.