



**HB 1588**

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Chair Porter and members of the committee:

My name is Christopher Scott, and I am the current Policy, Advocacy and Research Director for the North Dakota Student Association. I am here to express the NDSA's opposition to HB 1588.

The North Dakota Student Association (NDSA) is a student organization established in 1969 that is dedicated to ensuring that students have a voice in policy that affects Higher Education. The NDSA consists of delegates from each of the 11 public institutions that meet monthly to engage students in Higher Education policy in North Dakota. Our mission is to empower students, foster collaboration between students across campuses in the North Dakota University System, and to advocate on issues of higher education in support of access, affordability, quality, and the student experience.

HB 1588 proposes to permit the possession of firearms and dangerous weapons in publicly owned and operated buildings. Additionally, it would allow cities, counties and townships the authority to enforce and enact ordinances prohibiting the possession of firearms or dangerous weapons in publicly owned areas. However, if passed, HB 1588 would also allow firearms and dangerous weapons on college campuses. The current wording of HB 1588 would prevent institutions and the State Board of Higher Education from implementing policies that prohibit the possession of firearm on college campuses, jeopardizing the safety of thousands of students, staff and faculty across the state.

Historically, the NDSA has opposed state gun legislation that would threaten the safety of the students of North Dakota. In 2021, the NDSA opposed HB 1311, which would have allowed the possession of a firearm or dangerous weapon in a public space. In response to HB 1311, the NDSA passed NDSA Resolution [NDSA-16-2021](#): A Resolution in Opposition of HB 1311. In 2023, the NDSA opposed and testified against [HB 1404](#), a bill which would have allowed concealed gun carry on college campuses. Recognizing the ongoing efforts of the legislature to approve open and concealed firearm carry, the NDSA proactively passed [NDSA-12-2324](#): A Resolution in Opposition to Open and Concealed Gun Carry on NDUS College Campuses in March of 2023. The resolution opposes any and all legislation that would change section 62.1 of the North Dakota Century Code to allow firearms on campuses, whether open or concealed carry.

One of the NDSA's concerns about this bill is increased accessibility of a lethal means to suicide for NDUS students experiencing mental health crises. Mental health challenges, including depression and suicidal ideation are significant issues among college students. According to the North Dakota Behavioral Health Data Book in 2023, there are approximately 41,000 North Dakota adults that experienced serious mental health illnesses in the prior year. The Data Book goes further and states that in 2021, 153 North Dakotans died by suicide, an increase from 134 suicides in 2019. Of those that died by suicide in 2021, 80% of them were male, 20% person were female. In addition, 61% of those who died by suicide in 2021 were between the ages of 20 and 49, an age range that includes the traditional college age demographic. Additionally, data from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2023) specifies that the suicide rate in North Dakota was 20.3 per 100,000 people, exceeding the national average of 14.1 per 100,000. North Dakota's firearm death rate is reported to be 13.3 per 100,000, also above than the national average of 7.5 per 100,000.

An additional concern the NDSA has with this bill and other legislation that would allow firearms on college campuses, is that these bills as mentioned before, jeopardize the safety of the college campus community. They could lead to an increase the risk of a gun violence, including campus shootings, as institutions would not be able to distinguish between students carrying firearms for self-protection and those with harmful intentions.

The presence of firearms also raises concerns among faculty and staff. The potential for firearms to escalate conflicts is concerning, as a student dissatisfied with an academic outcome of a course that they took, or other university matters may resort to firearm violence in an emotionally charged situation. This concern shared among faculty could deter prospective faculty from taking jobs in North Dakota universities, impacting the overall quality of education that would be offered across the state.

For these concerns of campus safety and student mental health concerns, the NDSA strongly opposes HB 1588. On behalf of the NDSA, I ask for a DO NOT PASS recommendation from the committee on this bill, or for an amendment exempting North Dakota colleges and universities.

North Dakota Data Book:

[https://www.hhs.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/BH/BehavioralHealthDataBook\\_March2023\\_web.pdf](https://www.hhs.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/BH/BehavioralHealthDataBook_March2023_web.pdf)

Kaiser Family Foundation:

<https://www.kff.org/statedata/mental-health-and-substance-use-state-fact-sheets/north-dakota/>