



TO: NORTH DAKOTA LEGISLATURE-69<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATIVE SESSION

RE: **TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF HOUSE BILL 1311**

1/23/2025

Chairman Longmuir and committee members,

Good morning, my name is Travis Bateman and I represent the Badlands Search & Rescue Service along with the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of North Dakota. I submit to you this testimony in full support and in favor of House Bill 1311.

Volunteerism as a whole is on the decline and this is something that is impacting public safety and emergency services in North Dakota every day and every night. As society changes and the balance of work and life plays out, it is very obvious that communities will need to take a critical look at how these departments are to be staffed and remain able to provide the critical services that they do.

It is becoming more and more prevalent that the interest or dedication that younger members of our communities have is shifting. The idea to drop what they are doing at home or work to go and leave their family, leave work and miss out on their pay, drive their personal vehicle with personal fuel, and often times to then risk personal injury or death that the inherent duties ask of them just isn't enough.

What are we to do when there is nobody to answer the call? While the vast majority of our public safety teams are volunteer, they are still required to attain training and certifications on an annual or similar basis and then maintain those certifications through continued education. This means more time, more money, more ask of our volunteers.

Most members of our services only needed the incentive to help. That appears to be changing. More and more everything is coming down to monetary benefits or other incentives to attract and then keep them. We cannot simply drop training requirements to keep names on a roster. It doesn't do any good for an emergency to simply have someone that can drive a fire engine or ambulance to a scene. Then what? What good is that if the people with that vehicle aren't trained in the necessary skills and abilities to perform the tasks to standard and to do it safely?

We must find solutions in the near term as I fear that as the roster of members gets older and older that the risks and liabilities continue to mount. There already are departments having to close their doors or request mutual aid for many incidents that are otherwise routine due to not having enough trained and capable members. Ambulance services are having to rely on neighboring districts to respond to medical events. When seconds count, that has a very negative impact on the person waiting for help. Fire departments having to request mutual aid from the district next door are risking their personnel but also risking their home districts with extended response times, reduced staffing for an incident over all the districts involved, the extended response times, and after that, the incidental physical impacts of the volunteers that are now being taxed to handle more, with less.

I have witnessed personally, fire services responding and having one or two people show up in apparatus where they should, by standard, have no less than four people to adequately and safely handle an incident. Firefighters working solo on opposite sides of a structure fire. Or, one firefighter operating an engine, driving it, parking it, setting the hose line, charging the line and operating the pump, and then running to man the hose and apply water to flame. Can you imagine how unsafe all of that is?

There are solutions to the challenges faced. Some better than others. Some that are small in effort or deed, but impactful and of benefit to the person volunteering. We simply need to take an in-depth look to identify and implement them before we enter a more risky environment. Again, in many places here in North Dakota and across the nation, this is already present and happening.

North Dakota passed a bill a few years back that provides volunteer fire, EMS, SAR, and dive teams to have up to two vehicles registered free of charge and don red volunteer emergency responder license plates. Aside from that, there is no monetary incentive for people. Yet the costs to volunteer continue to mount. We pay for the fuel and operate our personal vehicles to respond to the station or directly to scene. We pay for the travel, food, fuel, motel, and training event costs many times. Sometimes the lodging, food, travel expenses, and training certification fees are funded through grant or other funds, but often times it falls squarely on the shoulders of the individual volunteer.

When it costs an individual more from their personal account to volunteer to help their community, that isn't seen as doable or even enjoyable to many nowadays. The economic impacts for the individual households are mounting and the current system in my mind is not sustainable in the long term.

Money can't be the only incentive however. Districts still need to maintain a standard of capable, trained, and professional volunteers. So, there exists a need to study and examine the overall readiness or capabilities that currently exist to identify and realize just how critical this already is. Many volunteers struggle to respond to the calls and meetings at home, let alone to go and attend training events to adequately ensure they know what to do and how to do it safely.

The same can be said for search and rescue volunteers even more as we train our members through our organization following national standards. However, we also operate our personal vehicles for everything, we don't have the ability to drive to a station and then respond with apparatus or an

ambulance. Our members also have to purchase their own gear, packs, food, and everything else to be self-sufficient in the field. This has been impactful for us on a negative front in all facets of volunteerism from time to cost to training standards. We have shifted our training program as much as possible between in persona and remote or by videocall and that still hasn't helped in retention. It always comes down to time as the reason someone can't continue to volunteer and commit.

Other states are in the same position or worse. North Dakota should certainly aim to get ahead of the issue and not continue down the path that we are on.

In many areas today, it takes two calls and resources are maxed out. Typically that is first with the number of volunteers available and then the number of apparatus sufficient for the call. Then we request help from the agency next door and the domino effect continues and readiness falters over a larger and larger geographical area.

The solutions to the volunteer dilemma exist, it simply needs to be looked at in depth, from a statewide standpoint to gather all of the components involved, identify needs and incentives, and then to formulate a system of implementation. But we need a study to gather all of that from every corner of our state first.

Please recommend a DO PASS for HB 1311.

Thank you and I am available for any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

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