

Testimony of Susan Dollinger
SB 2387 – Senate Human Services Committee
February 4, 2025

Good morning, Madam Chair Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee. For the record, my name is Susan Sommerfeld. I am here to testify in favor of SB 2387. This bill seeks to add protections for victims of sexual assault that in my opinion have been overlooked.

On September 27, 2020, my daughter was forcibly raped on the campus of North Dakota State University. At the time, she was attending Minot State University as a Criminal Justice major. The day she returned to Minot, she reached out to one of her professors for guidance and support. This professor is a practicing attorney in Minot and took my daughter seriously and offered her the support she needed.

This case became very complicated due to crossing multiple jurisdictional lines. The assault happened in Fargo, the rape kit was collected in Bismarck, and the report was made to the Police in Minot two days later. Being a scared kid away from home, making this report to the police was extraordinarily traumatic on top of having endured the assault and the collection of a rape kit. She asked the only person she knew in Minot to go with her and support her while she made the report. From the minute they went into the police station in Minot, her professor had become her private attorney.

It took 6 months from the date of the attack just to get to the preliminary hearing and arraignment. After that, there was delay after delay. I could stand here for an hour and tell you the many ways the criminal justice system failed her, but that is not why we are here. It took 2 years and 3 months from the date of the attack to the day we received a verdict.

I don't know if any of you have personal experience with the criminal justice system from the perspective of a victim, I truly hope you don't. What I want to tell you today is the mere fact that my daughter reached out and retained a private attorney ended up costing her even more stress and anxiety than any victim should have to endure.

As the process played out, the defense team did not like the fact that the victim had an attorney watching out for her and guiding her through the process. So much so, the Fargo Forum picked up on the story and ran with it. Ultimately, my daughter's attorney had to get her own private attorney and go to court and defend herself for doing what was right, when all she wanted to do was support and protect a victim of sexual assault.

The defense team used the victim having an attorney as a weapon against my daughter to discredit her as a victim and her attorney. If you are interested in reading the article I have included a link here:

<https://www.inforum.com/news/fargo/how-a-sexual-assault-case-at-north-dakota-state-university-became-so-complex>

If we can normalize a victim having an attorney, then maybe more victims of sexual assault will have the strength to come forward. And just maybe, more victims will ultimately get the justice they deserve.

It is with great pride that I can tell you that my daughter is now in her second semester at the University of Montana School of Law. She would have preferred to be here as an advocate for other survivors but at this time cannot be derailed from her studies by reliving these traumatic experiences. She wants me to leave you with this:

“While Law School is immensely demanding and stressful, these challenges cannot compare to the time spent maneuvering the criminal justice system as a victim of sexual violence.”

Madam Chair, and members of the committee, I stand before you and respectfully ask for a do pass on SB 2387 and am happy to answer any questions you may have.