

Written Testimony on SB 2181  
Senate Industry and Business Committee  
January 21, 2025

My name is Michael Hayen, and I have been a full-time licensed law enforcement officer for nearly 20 years. Currently, I serve in North Dakota. I respectfully urge the Senate Industry and Business Committee to vote in favor of SB 2181 with a **DO PASS** recommendation.

First responders are the backbone of our communities, selflessly stepping into harm's way to protect and serve. While North Dakota has long recognized the importance of safeguarding their physical health, the evolving understanding of mental health underscores an equally vital need: addressing mental injuries like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To truly honor the service of these heroes, North Dakota's Workforce Safety Department should provide comprehensive coverage for first responders diagnosed with PTSD when their condition meets stringent, evidence-based criteria. This is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity to ensure the continued strength of our public safety and first responder system.

The demands placed on first responders are extraordinary. Police officers, firefighters, paramedics, and emergency personnel routinely face traumatic events far beyond the emotional strain of most occupations. From responding to fatal crashes and violent crimes to witnessing the most disturbing aspects of humanity, these individuals endure a relentless series of emotionally charged and often harrowing experiences. Their stress is not fleeting—it accumulates over time, each incident compounding the mental toll. This cumulative exposure significantly increases the risk of developing PTSD, a debilitating condition that affects personal well-being and professional performance.

Unlike the challenges faced by the average worker, the mental strain experienced by first responders is inherently tied to the extreme and unpredictable nature of their duties. Addressing this unique risk requires a targeted and thoughtful approach, ensuring that first responders receive the support they need while maintaining the integrity of the system.

North Dakota's proposed coverage for PTSD is designed with rigorous safeguards to ensure fairness and reliability. Diagnoses must be made by licensed psychiatrists or psychologists, ensuring assessments are conducted by highly qualified professionals. Additionally, diagnoses must adhere to the DSM-5-TR, the gold standard for mental health evaluations, promoting consistency and scientific validity. Pre-existing conditions are excluded, ensuring that the program focuses on injuries directly resulting from the demands of first responder duties. Finally, claims require reasonable medical certainty that at least 50% of the causation stems from work-related trauma, prioritizing resources for those whose mental health challenges are primarily tied to their service.

These robust criteria strike a careful balance: they provide critical support for those in genuine need while safeguarding the program against potential misuse. By upholding such standards, North Dakota ensures the system remains both compassionate and sustainable.

Failing to address PTSD among first responders would represent a profound moral failing. These men and women sacrifice their own mental and physical health to protect the public, often at great personal cost. Ignoring their needs risks exacerbating their suffering, potentially leading to devastating outcomes such as substance abuse, family breakdowns, and even suicide. Untreated PTSD also carries ripple effects, impacting families, colleagues, and the broader community. By offering comprehensive coverage, North Dakota can mitigate these risks, foster healing, and uphold the dignity of its first responders.

Providing this support sends a powerful message: North Dakota values and stands by those who dedicate their lives to public safety. Beyond the moral obligation, the practical benefits are undeniable. Supporting first responders' mental health facilitates recovery, enabling them to return to their essential roles. Proactively addressing PTSD reduces long-term costs associated with absenteeism, turnover, and disability claims.

Moreover, fostering a culture of mental health awareness and support reduces stigma, encouraging first responders to seek help without fear of judgment. This shift strengthens the workforce, enhances recruitment and retention, and ensures that experienced personnel remain in service. In a competitive labor market, offering comprehensive mental health benefits demonstrates a forward-thinking commitment to employee well-being, ultimately benefiting the state and its citizens.

Critics may voice concerns about the cost or potential for misuse of such programs. However, the strict eligibility criteria address these worries, ensuring that only legitimate claims are approved. The initial investment in mental health coverage is far outweighed by the long-term savings and societal benefits, including reduced disability claims, improved workplace productivity, and stronger community trust in public safety institutions.

North Dakota has an opportunity to lead by example, aligning with national trends that prioritize mental health and recognize the profound sacrifices of first responders. Providing PTSD coverage under the outlined framework is more than a financial commitment—it is a declaration of respect, compassion, and gratitude for those who protect us.

The extraordinary challenges faced by first responders demand an extraordinary response. By addressing their mental health needs with the seriousness and care they deserve, North Dakota can uphold its duty to protect those who protect us. It is time to act decisively, ensuring that our first responders receive the support they need to continue serving our communities with strength and resilience.

Respectfully,



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