

My name is Halle Peterson, and I come from a divorced home. This is my first time publicly sharing my story. It is painful for me, but it is time that I break the silence, because I do not want anyone to go through what I went through. I am here to speak out against the bills my dad has proposed and give you a glimpse at how they would have, or could, injure me and my siblings. Although I am 18 and these bills will no longer directly affect me, I am concerned about the negative impact they will have on my siblings and other children in North Dakota.

Senate Bill 2184, lines 11-16, states that if a parent cannot prove abuse, the other parent will be awarded additional parenting time for time lost during investigation. But why should children be punished if a parent cannot gather enough proof of abuse? Forcing additional parenting time disrupts the children's routine. If one parent fears the other is harming the child and takes steps to protect them, but the court decides the alleged harm either did not occur or is lacking enough evidence--which is a common scenario, why should the child be separated from the concerned parent? This parent posed no threat, yet the bill would make the child suffer. In my case, when I tried to discuss my dad's abusive behavior and anger issues, he would weaponize scripture, get angrier, and call me stupid and brainwashed when I didn't agree with him. Not agreeing with him on things was seen as a personal attack and I would often have to hide in the locked bathroom or bedroom to get away.

Sometimes getting away from him in the apartment wasn't possible and I felt like I had to run. There were many times where I had to flee while on my dad's parenting time. One such instance occurred in summer of 2023, when my dad locked me and my siblings in his second-floor apartment and blocked the only doorway to escape, as his anger grew more and more out of control. He was yelling, swearing, and physically pushing us. Whenever we tried to open the door, he would push us away. I had rug burns on my legs and my sister had blood on her hand and fingers from the door hinge that had a sharp pin in it. We were trapped with an enraged dad who wouldn't let us out or discuss the situation. He took our phones, saying we couldn't talk to anyone about it. My siblings and I were in fight-or-flight mode, desperately seeking a way to escape. Every minute my dad grew more enraged, and the room felt tighter. I was shaking, crying, and utterly exhausted.

After several failed attempts to reason with him or open the door, we locked ourselves in my brother's bedroom. My sister used the phone she had hidden when she saw dad's anger getting out of control to text my mom. My brother tried to tie bedsheets together to climb out the 2<sup>nd</sup> story window for help, but I managed to talk him out of it. We even hung LED strobe lights out the window, praying drivers on the busy road outside the window might see our signal for help. It felt like help couldn't come fast enough.

The police arrived and spoke to my dad and us kids. As usual, he could flip on a dime from being enraged to calm and reasonable when others showed up. I begged the police

officers to take me to my mom's house where I felt safe and loved, but they said they couldn't do anything unless a child was seriously harmed. That's when I learned that rug burns, small puncture wounds, and emotional and mental abuse were not enough "proof." After the police left, my dad let me out of the apartment briefly, warning me to return within fifteen minutes or face serious consequences. He returned my phone but not my car keys. So, I grabbed my rollerblades and rushed to my friend's house. Her mom hugged me and called my mom, who quickly came to console me.

With the 15-minute time running out, my mom drove me close to my dad's apartment so I could return on my own. Overcome by exhaustion, I went straight to my room and collapsed.

Two months before that, when I was 15, I ran from my dad's, but I refused to immediately return to his home. After I had trouble sleeping at his house I decided to sit on his couch and decompress. He took the opportunity to tell me how my mom was brainwashed and that I needed to find a husband I will submit too. He told me to never leave my future husband for any reason other than physical abuse. I was told that it was my duty as a woman to submit and have sex when my future husband desires it, because it is his need and I would be called to do that, biblically. I also had to hear how mom didn't do that enough and how that made him suffer. I tried to tell him I didn't want to talk about it, but that only made him angrier and it escalated quickly. Trying to escape, I ran to the garage. He chased me around my car, but thankfully I made it into my car and out of the garage before the door closed. I drove to a parking lot and sobbed. Once I could get my shaking under control, I called my mom and refused to go back to his house. That night I knew my siblings were asleep so I could remain with mom.

Under the proposed bill, lines 11-16, my mom would have faced a harrowing choice if she took my dad to court over what he did to us. She would have risked having my siblings and me spend more time with him, exposing us to further abuse, if she lost. With the little evidence we had, just a few pictures of scrapes and bruises, it would not have sufficed to prove the torment we endured. In those desperate moments, I was focused on protecting my siblings and myself, not on gathering evidence. This bill would only worsen the cycle of fear and suffering for children like us. I learned that the police couldn't help until they could see wounds that were much worse. I learned that the wounds and scars of emotional and spiritual abuse are extremely hard to prove.

