

Testimony on HB 1356
House Education Committee
Senator Dick Dever
January 27, 2021

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Dick Dever, Senator from District 32 here in Bismarck. I am also the father of three, grandfather of twelve, and a former Scoutmaster.

Five years ago, this month, the Interim Human Services Committee invited the Principals of an elementary school in Bismarck, a middle school in Bismarck, and the High School in Grafton to speak on behavioral health issues in our schools.

When the Principal of Dorothy Moses Elementary School in Bismarck passed his testimony out, I skimmed through it. By the number and severity of the issues, I assumed he was speaking for the entire District, but he was only speaking about one school.

When they were all three done, I raised my hand and said, "In addition to whatever we do legislatively, I think we need a statewide initiative that just says, 'People Matter!'" The committee enthusiastically agreed and said, "Go for it!"

We did go for it. Now, in South Bismarck, my Pastor and the Principal of the Middle School across the street lead an effort entitled, "People Matter".

We are dealing with addiction in Middle School and mental health issues in elementary school. Teachers appropriately say, "We're teachers. We're not social workers".

Over the past decades, I have heard Presidents of both parties say that we need more adult male mentors. I have had that opportunity, along with a lot of other good people.

I threw myself into my role as a Scoutmaster for six years in the nineties. We had a large Troop with as many as seventy Scouts and thirty Assistant Scoutmasters at one time. Twenty of those Assistants participated in most activities including our monthly campouts. I told my Troop Committee that I felt that we were truly blessed to have so many people with so many different skills and abilities and the thing that qualified me to be Scoutmaster was my complete lack of skills and abilities. That enabled me to stand back and say, "Gosh, how do you think we should do this?"

When I first met Mitch, he was an eleven-year-old fifth grader. His father had died by suicide two years previously and his mother wanted him to have positive adult male role models. He was full of spunk, so I asked him, "So, Mitch, what's your claim to fame?" Without hesitation, and with some sense of pride he said, "I believe I have the most green slips of anybody at Dorothy Moses!"

Some years later, I attended the Veteran's Day ceremony here on the Capitol grounds. His mother came to me and held out her hand. In her hand, she held a picture of Mitch in his Marine Corps dress uniform. I said, "He looks like a fine young gentleman. You must be very proud." She said, "Everything that he has become is because of you." She was far too generous in her comment, but the experience Mitch had with all the adult and older scout involvement made a big difference in his life.

Shane was the only child of a single mother. His mother wanted him to have adult male influence as well. Shane was special needs with an intellectual disability. He became a favorite of the Troop and several adults went out of their way to work with him. When he received his Eagle award, it was a source of pride for all of us. The Eagle rank is not about being intelligent or the things you do. It is about who you become.

Three or four times, we travelled to Grand Forks and toured a different program at UND and then attended a hockey game on Saturday evening. Between periods at one game, someone asked me if I was the Scoutmaster. Knowing the

conversation could go one way or the other from there, I said, "Yes, I am!" He said, "They are a great bunch of kids they are very well behaved."

Later that evening, Justin, who was a first-year scout, came to me and said that when we ate at the Student Union that day, they gave him one dollar too much in change. We would be leaving the next day before they opened so I told him to put the dollar in the offering plate at the church we were attending.

Scouting was always a positive influence and a community partner in youth involvement. For some reason, sometime in the nineties, the schools began saying, "If we allow those positive influencers in our schools, we will be required to allow the negative influencers." I have never understood that logic.

I believed that my greatest obligation as a Scoutmaster was to be a friend to boys who otherwise had no friends. I told the adults in the Troop that there can be no higher calling than to make a positive difference in the lives of young people. You have the opportunity to do just that with the passage of this bill.