

1155 Oxbow Ct,  
Grand Forks, ND 58203

January 23, 2023

Re: HB 1390

Chairman Weisz and Members of the North Dakota House Human Services Committee:

I strongly support HB 1390, the establishment of a suicide fatality review board for suicide deaths in North Dakota.

I am a forensic pathologist, Chair of Pathology at UND, Coroner of Grand Forks County, and designated forensic pathologist for 21 Eastern counties in ND by the State Forensic Examiner in Bismarck. I serve the families of North Dakota at their most devastating times – the sudden, unexpected death of a loved one, often by unnatural means. In Grand Forks County, we do the death investigations personally, going to homes, speaking with loved ones, and on occasion, delivering the news that shatters and changes lives forever. For the other 20 counties in ND, I may not go to the homes but am involved with loved ones as they try to make sense of the unimaginable. Suicides are RISING alarmingly. Currently, 25 – 30% of our cases (about 100 people a year) die by suicide in our small medical practice. These numbers DO NOT include most drug-related or traffic-related deaths, many of which are self-directed, but since we cannot measure intent, these are generally listed as “accidents.” If these were estimated, it might double the numbers considered.

In my 40+ year career, suicides have risen dramatically and have changed, involving younger victims and more victims. We cannot explain or predict many of these deaths and thus cannot intervene, and the cycle continues. Countless grief and loss of vibrant and productive members of society are now taken by suicide, and it touches most ND families. We need to reverse this. We must figure out the many pieces we are missing and make a difference. This panel CAN do this. In other areas, dedicated, multi-disciplinary teams can make a difference, one life at a time. This panel can identify and reverse this self-destructive trend robbing our families and communities of valued members, replacing their vibrancy with incomprehensible grief.

This panel is a citizen initiative, primarily volunteer, drawn from a broad constituency to ensure optimal functioning. I was most impressed with the openness of the sponsors of this bill to listen to what was needed, incorporate changes, and go forward. This minimal investment by the state will reap benefits beyond actual costs by providing the critically required platform and infrastructure for the successful interaction of the many players.

I urge a “DO PASS” for this critically needed legislation.

Mary Ann Sens, MD, PhD  
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Forensic Pathologist, Diplomate of the American Board of Pathology  
Physician, North Dakota  
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