

Testimony for HB 1390

Suicide Fatality Review Commission

from Rep. Karla Rose Hanson
for the House Human Services Committee on 1/25/23

Chairman Weisz and members of the Committee,

My name is Karla Rose Hanson, and I represent District 44. Today, I'm bringing to you HB 1390, which would create a statewide suicide fatality review commission in North Dakota.

The purpose of this commission is to prevent suicides in North Dakota. Suicide is a significant problem in our state, and it is not getting better. For people involved in behavioral health, North Dakota's suicide problem is what keeps them up at night. A review commission focused on suicide would identify solutions to help stem this problem.

Suicide is a serious problem in North Dakota. Suicide by the numbers:

- Our suicide numbers are at an all-time high: 159 North Dakotans died by suicide in 2022.
- Adjusting for population, the rate of suicide in North Dakota remains higher than the national average. North Dakota is ranked the 14th worst state for its rate of suicide.
- The rate of suicide is disproportionately high in rural areas, with veterans, with young people, and with people who identify as LGBTQ+.
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for young people in ND (ages 15-24). And it's a growing problem with our youth - research shows nearly 1 in 5 ND high school students seriously considered attempting suicide each year the last few years.
- In 2021, 80% of North Dakotans who died by suicide in were male and 20% female. Preliminary 2022 data show an 84/16 split. Women attempt suicide at a higher rate, but men are more likely to succeed because of the lethality of their method.
- The three most common methods of suicide include using a firearm (56%), hanging/strangulation (27%) and poisoning (11%). Firearms are the most lethal method.
- Crisis calls have increased dramatically in the last 10 years. FirstLink has seen a 10-fold increase, taking 1,501 calls related to suicide in 2012 and 15,465 in 2022.
- Hospital data shows 837 suicide attempts in 2022 with an average age of 30.
- In short, far too many North Dakotans have been touched by the pain of suicide.

The good news is that suicide is preventable. This commission will identify policies and actions to help prevent suicide.

- It would operate like ND's four other statewide fatality review commissions for domestic violence deaths, deaths of children, drug deaths, and maternal mortality.

- Each commission, including this one, brings together a variety of perspectives to review cases, identify risk factors in these deaths, and identify opportunities for improvements related to systems, services, and policies.
- Cass & Clay counties currently have a Suicide Fatality Review Commission, which has developed several suggestions for policy and practice improvements. People who work in this space see value in extending the work statewide.

The bill sets up the key components of the Suicide Fatality Review Commission.

- In short, the primary components of the bill include establishing the commission’s purpose, identifying the types of records needed for case reviews, articulating the expectations around confidentiality of those records, and listing potential members that may be appointed by the head of the ND Department of Health & Human Services. The commission would have assistance from DHHS, and the commission will issue an annual report of its findings and recommendations.
- Regarding the membership: The bill lists a variety of roles that could be valuable in reviewing cases and making recommendations around improvements to systems, services, and policies. The head of DHHS would have the ability to choose from this list and add other permanent or temporary members.
- Dr. Sens, the chair of pathology at UND and the designated forensic pathologist for 21 eastern counties in ND, believes a statewide suicide fatality review commission is critically needed. She was not able to testify because she is teaching today – but her testimony is online and you might have a printed copy for your reference.
- Because the Suicide Fatality Review Commission would have oversight from DHHS, we enable a stronger tie between the commission’s recommendations and the opportunity to implement those recommendations and ensure our people and financial resources are focused on the most effective suicide prevention solutions.
- Two potential amendments:
 - The committee might consider adding more roles to the list of potential committee members. In reviewing the bill draft, stakeholders have suggested we add the following roles: a legislator, an individual from the LGBTQ+ community, and an individual who works in public health.
 - If HB 1165 passes, the committee might change “executive director” to “commissioner” on lines 8, 10 and 11 of page 1 and lines 13-14 on page 3.

In summary, I would ask the committee to give a Do Pass recommendation to HB 1390. We are not winning the battle against suicide in ND. A suicide fatality review commission would serve as another mechanism to preventing suicide in our state by identifying trends and solutions – helping to prevent the pain that so many families feel when they lose a loved one. Thank you so much for the consideration.