

Chairman Porter and Members of the Committee,

My name is Faith Wahl, and I serve as the Student Body President at the University of North Dakota. I am presenting testimony in concurrence with Morgan Mastrud, the Student Body Vice President at the University of North Dakota. We are submitting testimony in opposition to HB 1194, relating to possession of a firearm or dangerous weapon at a public gathering.

It is extremely important that the committee reflect upon higher education considerations when debating the potential outcomes of this bill. On UND's campus, firearms or dangerous weapons are currently not allowed as a matter of safety for faculty, students, staff, administrators, and the general public. Buildings owned by the University of North Dakota are considered public property, and events that take place on university property would fall under the definition of a "public gathering" as outlined in Section 1 of 62. 1-02-05 of the North Dakota Century Code ^[1]. While firearms or dangerous weapons are not allowed at a "publicly owned or operated building," HB 1194^[2] outlines an exception for an individual who has "served in the United States on federal active duty, or served in the National Guard or a reserve unit located in North Dakota," who "was honorably discharged from the armed services, National Guard, or a reserve unit" and "possesses a valid class 1 firearm or dangerous weapon license issued by the attorney general under section 62.1-04-03." While this proposed exception attempts to ensure the safety of North Dakotans, it has dangerous implications for higher education.

The University of North Dakota is a military-friendly campus, indicating that the institution has several veteran or military-affiliated students who may choose to attend UND to

[1] <https://ndlegis.gov/cencode/t62-1c02.pdf#nameddest=62p1-02-05>

[2] <https://www.ndlegis.gov/assembly/68-2023/regular/documents/23-0457-03000.pdf>

[3] <https://www.healthdata.org/acting-data/gun-violence-united-states-outlier>

[4] <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>

work towards their academic pursuits. If any of these students have been honorably discharged from the armed forces, National Guard, or reserve unit and possess a valid class 1 firearm and dangerous weapon license, they would be eligible to carry a firearm or dangerous weapon on campus. Any actions that increase the availability of firearms or dangerous weapons on campus increases the opportunity for firearm-related incidents correlated with serious injury and death. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), “firearm injuries tend to be more frequent when in places where people have easy access to firearms” [3]. UND hosts several events and has several spaces on public property where the presence of a firearm would be extremely concerning. These instances include, but are not limited to, athletic events, conferences, meetings, students living in the residence halls, and many more. The safety of students at UND is of the utmost importance and the current version of HB 1194 threatens this safety.

Beyond the critical danger of firearms or dangerous weapons at large events, the potential presence of firearms or dangerous weapons on UND’s campus has several other significant implications. College students are frequently confronted with increased stressors throughout their time on campus, with the American Psychological Association detailing that over half of students “reported moderate or severe psychological stress” [4]. When firearms or dangerous weapons are made more accessible, particularly around a population that is more susceptible to behavioral health issues, the risk for a student fatally hurting themselves or others is heightened. Furthermore, the presence of firearms or dangerous weapons on campus significantly complicates the roles and responses of University Police Department (UPD) officers. Currently, when officers respond to a call on campus, they operate under a law that allows them to be the only one armed in the situation. If students who were honorably discharged

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from the armed forces, National Guard, or reserve unit in North Dakota are permitted to possess firearms or dangerous weapons on campus, UPD officers may find themselves responding to much more charged and dangerous situations. In order to allow UPD officers to appropriately respond to situations on campus, firearms and dangerous weapons should continue to be prohibited on campus for all students. To ensure the safety and security of students that attend the University of North Dakota, no changes should be made to the current firearm and dangerous weapon policies in place.

Chairman Porter and members of the committee, we respectfully request a Do Not Pass on HB 1194 as it is currently written. If the bill were to be amended to exclude higher education campuses from the proposed addition to subsection 2 of section 62. 1-02-05 of the North Dakota Century Code, we would take a neutral stance on the bill. Thank you for your time, and we are available for any questions that you might have.

Respectfully submitted,

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