



"Supporting those who served."

10 March 2023

Chairman Luick and Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee,

I am Michelle Gauvin-Panos, Executive Director of ND Cares and I submit this testimony in support of House Bill 1326, allowing the commissioner of veterans' affairs access to death records of an individual designated as having served in the United States armed forces.

ND Cares is also the organization leading the North Dakota state team in the Governor's Challenge to Reduce Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families. The North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs and the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services are integral members of that team. We are working directly with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration on priority initiatives in several areas.

One important initiative is to obtain more detailed vital records data for military related deaths, whether they are active duty or veterans, for the purposes of analyzing that data, identifying trends, and deploying multi-agency intervention strategies to reduce further suicides.

Concerning trends could include a number of suicides among service members or veterans of the same era of military service, deployment in the same region, shared experiences, concentrations of suicides in specific areas of the state or among a specific industry.

As an example, last year there were four suicides of energy-industry workers in the northwest part of North Dakota. Much later, it was discovered that they were all veterans. Had this trend been spotted early, potentially life-saving prevention measures could have been administered in the area.

According to the ND Vital Records Department data prepared for ND Cares, there were approximately 141 military related (active duty and veterans) suicides in North Dakota between 2017 and 2022. Working together we can reduce this number in the future – but we require the information to do so.

ND Cares urges the committee to pass HB1390 and allow the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs access to records that will ultimately help save lives.

Respectfully,

Michelle Gauvin-Panos
Executive Director
ND Cares
Office of the Adjutant General
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