

Legislative Testimony

Senate Human Services Committee

March 13, 2023

To: Senator Judy Lee and Senate Human Services Committee Members

From: I am Dr. Ethan Dahl, PhD, Assistant Professor in Education, Health, & Behavior Studies at UND and I am also the primary investigator of a 5 year Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suicide prevention grant titled ND HOPES.

Thank you for the time to testify in support of House Bill 1390. I believe in the creation of a suicide fatality review commission and want to speak about the importance of data regarding the prevention of deaths by suicide. ND HOPES stands for North Dakota Healthcare, Opportunity, Prevention, and Education in Suicide prevention and was funded to serve the needs of rural individuals in western North Dakota. This project is working to expand the capacity to serve those in our state through training, technical assistance, and the use of data to prevent suicides. As part of a larger cohort of 17 state sites including New York and California, ND HOPES brings the expertise of UND and our multi-sectoral partners to our prevention efforts.

The creation of a suicide fatality review commission creates the opportunity to discuss the circumstances surrounding local and state suicide deaths with decisionmakers at the table. Deaths by suicide are preventable but understanding the opportunities for prevention through policy and programmatic decisions requires diverse partnerships and perspectives. We know that there are multiple shortcomings in data on suicide including 2-year lag, inaccuracies, lack of adequate information, and limited data at the local level. As a result, the data do not guide decision making. It is because of these shortcomings that UND and our partners wrote our grant to support ongoing state efforts in suicide prevention.

House Bill 1390 will establish a commission to continue the process of insuring that we have a deeper understanding of the data emerging from our communities. In that spirit, the grant hired a full-time epidemiologist as part of a partnership between UND and ND HHS. This position is split half time at ND HSS and half at The University of Chicago (ND HOPES partners) as part of our multi-sectoral partnerships. ND HOPES, as a 5 year grant, looks forward to working collaboratively with the commission in expanding access to surveillance data.

Thank you for your time and consideration of House Bill 1390 and I am free to respond to any questions.