

Legislative Testimony

Senate Human Services Committee

March 13, 2023

Senator Judy Lee and Senate Human Services Committee Members

I am Thomasine Heitkamp, LCSW (135) from Grand Forks, North Dakota. My background is as an educator and researcher at the University of North Dakota (UND). I currently serve as a Behavioral Health Research Specialist. I have administered several multi-state grant-funded programs to ensure evidence-based practices in behavioral health.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 1390. I wish to thank the sponsors of this bill. “When we know better, we do better”. Deaths by suicide are preventable with timely, evidence-based, and often low-cost interventions. However, for suicide prevention strategies to be effective, a comprehensive multisectoral strategy is required and that effort must include data. The Suicide Fatality Review (SFR) Commission will gather the data that will assist in guiding best practices.

The Commission will be is cutting-edge and has been successful in multiple counties throughout the nation. In Washington County, OR, for example, they were able to decrease suicide rates in the county using a fatality review committee. Some specific examples include that they learned that people were dropping their pets off at animal shelters before taking their lives, so they trained animal shelter staff and volunteers in screening strategies. People were checking into a specific motel to take their lives, so they trained the front desk staff at this motel in screening strategies. Eviction led to suicide, so the county began sending a mental health counselor when eviction notices were served. This bill will allow ND to support these same activities with knowledge.

Hence, this bill will put ND at the forefront in the United States in assuring work across the nation to help providers, epidemiologists, and other researchers, educators, and family members with a greater capacity to prevent suicide.

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