

Dear Judiciary Committee Members,

I am writing this testimony in support of the Three Strikes bill. I am a divorced father of three children living in West Fargo, and I have a personal equal-time shared parenting judgment. While this bill does not affect me directly, I am compelled to advocate for it because of what I have witnessed in the current system. What I have seen horrifies me: our system is unintentionally perpetuating harm, destroying children, families, and communities.

Parental alienation is a form of severe child abuse with lifelong consequences. Research shows that in 10% of divorce cases, one parent severely alienates the other, with moderate to severe alienation occurring in an additional 10%. This means that 20% of divorce cases involve significant harm to children through the destruction of their relationship with one parent. Alienation can occur within 30 to 60 days and has devastating effects, including increased risks of suicide, violent crimes, emotional instability, school dropouts, drug addiction, teenage pregnancies, and even school shootings.

For context, 63% of teenagers who die by suicide come from single-parent or majority-parent homes. Data further suggests that up to 25% of men who die by suicide and 15-20% of women are alienated parents. In North Dakota, this could mean as many as 50 lives lost annually due to parental alienation. This figure does not account for the additional toll of drug overdoses, incarcerations, and other related issues stemming from broken family support structures. These are not just statistics; they represent real people, real children, and real families in our state.

Currently, once a parent has alienated the children enough, they may start to withhold the children from the other parent during their legal parenting time. They completely disregard the discretion of judges and existing court orders, hoping to manipulate the children into rejecting the other parent. When this happens, and the police are called, officers often tell the alienated parent they can do nothing and suggest going back to court. It can take 3-6 months to get a court hearing and up to another 90 days for a ruling. During this time, the alienating parent has months of uninterrupted control to deepen the alienation. Without guardrails, parents with harmful intentions continue to exploit the system without consequence.

The Three Strikes bill establishes these much-needed guardrails. It ensures that parents who disregard the law face appropriate consequences, deterring this harmful behavior. This bill does not restrict any parent's ability to use the proper steps and procedures to protect children. Parents have ample time before custody exchanges to address legitimate concerns, including calling the police for a welfare check or filing a report. This bill reduces the misuse of children as weapons in custody disputes, decreasing instances of domestic violence and emotional harm.

The Three Strikes bill provides multiple opportunities for a parent to correct their behavior. Currently, leaving the state with a child during the other parent's time is a Class C felony. This bill broadens that standard to include in-state violations. After two misdemeanor offenses, a third violation becomes a Class C felony. This escalation is essential to protect children, families, and communities.

Please stand for children, our families, and our communities by giving the Three Strikes bill a "Do Pass" recommendation.

Best regards,
Todd Peterson
1-19-2025

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Todd Peterson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.