

**2023 HOUSE HUMAN SERVICES**

**HB 1390**

# 2023 HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

## Human Services Committee Pioneer Room, State Capitol

HB 1390  
1/25/2023

Relating to the creation of a suicide fatality review commission; and to provide an appropriation.
--

Chairman Weisz called the meeting to order at 10:15 AM.

Chairman Robin Weisz, Reps. Karen A. Anderson, Mike Beltz, Clayton Fegley, Kathy Frelich, Dawson Holle, Dwight Kiefert, Carrie McLeod, Todd Porter, Brandon Prichard, Karen M. Rohr, and Jayme Davis present. Rep. Gretchen Dobervich virtually present. Vice Chairman Ruby not present.

### **Discussion Topics:**

- Statistic of suicide deaths and attempts
- Reporting of suicide
- Methods of suicide
- Recommendations
- Amendments
- Self-harm
- Care and support programs

Rep. Hanson introduced HB 1390 with supportive testimony and suggested possible amendments (#16640).

Pam Sagness, Executive Director of Behavioral Health Division with the Department of Health and Human Services, supportive testimony (#16713).

Patricia Leno, North Dakota citizen from Bismarck, spoke in favor of bill.

Jennifer Hillinck, Executive Director at First Link, supportive testimony (#16459).

### **Additional written testimony:**

Kriste Ross, Coroner for Cass County, supportive testimony (#15649).

Mary Ann Sens, Forensic Pathologist, Chair of Pathology at the University of North Dakota, and Coroner for Grand Forks County, supportive testimony (#16260).

Faye Seidler, North Dakota citizen, supportive testimony (#16463).

Laura Dronen, North Dakota citizen, supportive testimony (#16584).

Chairman Weisz adjourned the meeting at 10:47 AM.

House Human Services Committee  
HB 1390  
1/25/2023  
Page 2

*Phillip Jacobs, Committee Clerk*

# 2023 HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

## Human Services Committee Pioneer Room, State Capitol

HB 1390  
2/13/2023

Relating to the creation of a suicide fatality review commission; and to provide an appropriation.
--

Chairman Weisz called the meeting to order at 4:25 PM.

Chairman Robin Weisz, Reps. Karen A. Anderson, Mike Beltz, Clayton Fegley, Kathy Frelich, Dawson Holle, Dwight Kiefert, Carrie McLeod, Todd Porter, Brandon Prichard, Karen M. Rohr, and Jayme Davis present. Rep. Gretchen Dobervich virtually present. Vice Chairman Ruby not present.

### Discussion Topics:

- Committee action

Representative Anderson moved a DO NOT PASS on HB 1390.

Motion withdrawn.

Representative Dobervich moved to amend HB 1390. (#16640)

Seconded by Representative Davis.

Roll Call Vote:

Representatives	Vote
Representative Robin Weisz	N
Representative Matthew Ruby	N
Representative Karen A. Anderson	N
Representative Mike Beltz	Y
Representative Jayme Davis	Y
Representative Gretchen Dobervich	Y
Representative Clayton Fegley	N
Representative Kathy Frelich	N
Representative Dawson Holle	N
Representative Dwight Kiefert	N
Representative Carrie McLeod	N
Representative Todd Porter	Y
Representative Brandon Prichard	N
Representative Karen M. Rohr	N

**Motion fails: 4-10-0.**

Representative Anderson moved a DO NOT PASS on HB 1390.

Seconded by Representative Rohr.

Roll Call Vote:

<b>Representatives</b>	<b>Vote</b>
Representative Robin Weisz	N
Representative Matthew Ruby	N
Representative Karen A. Anderson	Y
Representative Mike Beltz	N
Representative Jayme Davis	N
Representative Gretchen Dobervich	N
Representative Clayton Fegley	N
Representative Kathy Frelich	N
Representative Dawson Holle	N
Representative Dwight Kiefert	N
Representative Carrie McLeod	N
Representative Todd Porter	N
Representative Brandon Prichard	Y
Representative Karen M. Rohr	Y

**Motion fails: 3-11-0.**

Representative Porter moved a DO PASS on HB 1390.

Seconded by Representative Beltz.

Roll Call Vote:

<b>Representatives</b>	<b>Vote</b>
Representative Robin Weisz	Y
Representative Matthew Ruby	Y
Representative Karen A. Anderson	N
Representative Mike Beltz	Y
Representative Jayme Davis	Y
Representative Gretchen Dobervich	Y
Representative Clayton Fegley	Y
Representative Kathy Frelich	Y
Representative Dawson Holle	Y
Representative Dwight Kiefert	Y
Representative Carrie McLeod	Y
Representative Todd Porter	Y
Representative Brandon Prichard	N
Representative Karen M. Rohr	N

**Motion carries 11-3-0.**

Bill carrier: Representative Dobervich

Chairman Weisz adjourned the meeting at 4:37 PM.

*Phillip Jacobs, Committee Clerk By: Leah Kuball*

**REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE**

**HB 1390: Human Services Committee (Rep. Weisz, Chairman)** recommends **DO PASS** (11 YEAS, 3 NAYS, 0 ABSENT AND NOT VOTING). HB 1390 was placed on the Eleventh order on the calendar.

**2023 SENATE HUMAN SERVICES**

**HB 1390**

# 2023 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Human Services Committee**  
Fort Lincoln Room, State Capitol

HB 1390  
3/13/2023

Relating to the creation of a suicide fatality review commission; and to provide an appropriation.
--

2:33 PM **Madam Chair Lee** called the hearing to order. **Senators Lee, Cleary, Clemens, K. Roers, Weston, and Hogan** were present.

## **Discussion Topics:**

- Suicide prevention
- Interventions
- 14th worst state of suicide
- Suicide review commission

2:34 PM **Representative Karla Rose Hanson, District 44**, introduced HB 1390 and testified in favor #23930.

2:48 PM **Kristie Ross, Cass County Coroner's Office**, testified in favor. #23707.

2:57 PM **James Knopick**, presented testimony on behalf of **Pamela Sagness, Executive Director, Department Behavioral Health Division of Health, and Human Services**, testified in favor. #24523.

2:59 PM **Dr. Ethan Dahl, Assistant Professor, University of North Dakota**, testified online in favor. #24347.

3:05 PM **Thomasine Heitkamp, Behavioral Health Research Specialists, University of North Dakota**, testified online in favor. #24348.

## **Additional Written Testimony:**

**Mary Ann Sens, Forensic Pathologist, Chair of Pathology at UND, Corner of Grand Forks County**, in favor #23778

**Theresa Deckert, Board Member, Suicide Prevention Coalition and Co-Chair of Lake Region Out of the Darkness Walk**, in favor 23838

**Faye Seidler, Suicide Prevention Advocate**, in favor #24090

**Joe Hall, President, North Dakota Veterans Legislative Council,-** in favor #24261

3:08 PM **Madam Chair Lee** adjourned the hearing.

*Patricia Lahr, Committee Clerk*



# 2023 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

Human Services Committee  
Fort Lincoln Room, State Capitol

HB 1390  
3/14/2023

Relating to the creation of a suicide fatality review commission; and to provide an appropriation.
--

9:58 AM **Madam Chair Lee** called the meeting to order. **Senators Lee, Cleary, Clemens, K. Roers, Weston**, were present. **Senator Hogan** was absent.

### Discussion Topics:

- Suicide prevention in North Dakota
- Suicide review commission

**Senator Lee** calls for discussion.

**Senator K. Roers** moves **DO PASS**.

**Senator Cleary** seconded the motion.

**Senator K. Roers** withdrew the motion.  
**Senator Cleary** withdrew the seconded.

**Senator Cleary** moved to adopt the amendment by striking, Executive Director and change to Commissioner on page 1, line 8,10,11 on page 13 and 14. LC23.0562.01001.

**Senator K. Roers** seconded the motion.

Roll call vote.

Senators	Vote
Senator Judy Lee	Y
Senator Sean Cleary	Y
Senator David A. Clemens	Y
Senator Kathy Hogan	AB
Senator Kristin Roers	Y
Senator Kent Weston	Y

Motion passed 5-0-1.

**Senator K. Roers** moves **DO PASS AS AMENDED**.

**Seconded Cleary** seconded the motion.

Roll call vote.

<b>Senators</b>	<b>Vote</b>
Senator Judy Lee	Y
Senator Sean Cleary	Y
Senator David A. Clemens	Y
Senator Kathy Hogan	AB
Senator Kristin Roers	Y
Senator Kent Weston	Y

Motion passed 5-0-1.

**Senator Clemens** will carry HB 1390.

10:04 AM **Madam Chair Lee** adjourned the meeting.

*Patricia Lahr, Committee Clerk*

March 14, 2023

*Alt*

*3-14-23  
(1-1)*

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO HOUSE BILL NO. 1390

Page 1, line 8, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 1, line 10, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 1, line 11, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 3, line 13, remove "executive"

Page 3, line 14, replace "director" with "commissioner"

Re-number accordingly

**REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE**

**HB 1390: Human Services Committee (Sen. Lee, Chairman)** recommends **AMENDMENTS AS FOLLOWS** and when so amended, recommends **DO PASS** (5 YEAS, 0 NAYS, 1 ABSENT AND NOT VOTING). HB 1390 was placed on the Sixth order on the calendar. This bill does not affect workforce development.

Page 1, line 8, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 1, line 10, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 1, line 11, replace "executive director" with "commissioner"

Page 3, line 13, remove "executive"

Page 3, line 14, replace "director" with "commissioner"

Renumber accordingly

**TESTIMONY**

**HB 1390**



**CASS COUNTY CORONER** Kriste Rehkamp Ross, B.S. F-ABMDI  
1220 25th Street South, Fargo, North Dakota 58103 • Phone: 701-241-5920 • Fax: 701-241-5922 • [www.casscountynd.gov](http://www.casscountynd.gov)

Testimony prepared for:  
**House Human Services Committee**  
Prepared January 23, 2023  
Kriste Ross, Coroner  
Cass County Government

RE: House Bill No. 1390

Committee Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kriste Ross, Coroner for Cass County. I am here in support of House Bill 1390.

I began working in the Cass County Coroner's Office in 2001. Since that time, I have investigated numerous unattended deaths including suicides. After working with families who lost their loved ones to suicide, and often trying to understand "why" a suicide happens, I reached out to Mary Weiler, founder of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention chapter in North Dakota. I wanted to learn more about how to interact with grieving families, have resources available to support loved ones but even just as important, understanding what could have been done to prevent the suicide.

Over the years, I have kept statistics on suicides, drug overdoses, alcohol-related deaths, homicides, accidental deaths, and deaths of minors. Most of these types of deaths currently have a State Fatality Review Panel. I've been involved in local review panels for suicide-related deaths. While the details of how the death occurred are important, it is even more important to know the factors leading up to the death itself. By having these reviews, the information available makes it possible to identify where there are shortcomings in identifying mental health crisis, resources, and educational opportunities.

Statistics show that one death by suicide impacts about 135 family and friends directly. What we also know is that when there is a death in a school, workplace, or church it impacts the co-workers, teachers, student, congregations, and church leaders in a profound way. Some who struggle with mental health issues will need care for months or years to come. I am in support of this bill as I believe that forming this review committee will do what it can to reduce the number of suicide-related deaths, help provide targeted education based on research and generate specific recommendations to our legislative leaders on what to do for our families, survivors, communities, hospitals, schools, and workplaces.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kriste Ross". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kriste" being more prominent than the last name "Ross".

Kriste Ross

Cass County Government, Coroner

(Reference: Cereal et al., 2018 pg. 5)

1155 Oxbow Ct,  
Grand Forks, ND 58203

January 23, 2023

Re: HB 1390

Chairman Weisz and Members of the North Dakota House Human Services Committee:

I strongly support HB 1390, the establishment of a suicide fatality review board for suicide deaths in North Dakota.

I am a forensic pathologist, Chair of Pathology at UND, Coroner of Grand Forks County, and designated forensic pathologist for 21 Eastern counties in ND by the State Forensic Examiner in Bismarck. I serve the families of North Dakota at their most devastating times – the sudden, unexpected death of a loved one, often by unnatural means. In Grand Forks County, we do the death investigations personally, going to homes, speaking with loved ones, and on occasion, delivering the news that shatters and changes lives forever. For the other 20 counties in ND, I may not go to the homes but am involved with loved ones as they try to make sense of the unimaginable. Suicides are RISING alarmingly. Currently, 25 – 30% of our cases (about 100 people a year) die by suicide in our small medical practice. These numbers DO NOT include most drug-related or traffic-related deaths, many of which are self-directed, but since we cannot measure intent, these are generally listed as “accidents.” If these were estimated, it might double the numbers considered.

In my 40+ year career, suicides have risen dramatically and have changed, involving younger victims and more victims. We cannot explain or predict many of these deaths and thus cannot intervene, and the cycle continues. Countless grief and loss of vibrant and productive members of society are now taken by suicide, and it touches most ND families. We need to reverse this. We must figure out the many pieces we are missing and make a difference. This panel CAN do this. In other areas, dedicated, multi-disciplinary teams can make a difference, one life at a time. This panel can identify and reverse this self-destructive trend robbing our families and communities of valued members, replacing their vibrancy with incomprehensible grief.

This panel is a citizen initiative, primarily volunteer, drawn from a broad constituency to ensure optimal functioning. I was most impressed with the openness of the sponsors of this bill to listen to what was needed, incorporate changes, and go forward. This minimal investment by the state will reap benefits beyond actual costs by providing the critically required platform and infrastructure for the successful interaction of the many players.

I urge a “DO PASS” for this critically needed legislation.

Mary Ann Sens, MD, PhD  
Coroner, Grand Forks County  
Forensic Pathologist, Diplomate of the American Board of Pathology  
Physician, North Dakota  
Professor and Chair of Pathology, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences

TESTIMONY  
Human Services Committee  
HB 1390  
January 25, 2023  
Jennifer Illich

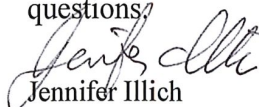
Chairman Weisz and Members of the North Dakota House Human Services Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the life-saving work of FirstLink. My name is Jennifer Illich, and I am the executive director of FirstLink. I am here to express support for HB 1390. FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota to answer the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and 211 information and referral phone lines. FirstLink services are imperative to build a strong mental health system that provides the care, support, and services needed to help people build better lives throughout North Dakota.

Ten years ago, FirstLink took 1,501 calls directly related to suicide, in 2021 we took 15,465 calls related to suicide. The complexity and volume of our calls have greatly increased. For a time that we did not want to come in as number one, North Dakota saw the nation's largest increase in suicide rates from 1999 to 2016, a 58% increase according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When this national report was released, CBS Morning news reached out to me to ask what is going on in North Dakota and why our suicide rate is increasing at such a quick rate. I told them that I could guess using the limited stats that our state had mixed with the trends that we heard on our 988 and 211 phone lines. That was the best information that I could give them without having a suicide fatality review commission. The reporter that called me said that we need to investigate these deaths so we can take action to prevent them and decrease this number. The suicide fatality review commission will help us identify trends to help prevent these crisis situations.

Every day FirstLink's goal is to save lives on the phone. The suicide fatality review commission is a necessary part of our plan to make our communities safer from suicide. The commission needs to be able to identify both risk and protective factors, which will lead to the knowledge needed to recommend policies and protocols to improve the community and system responses to people at risk of suicide.

I hope you will consider supporting HB 1390, so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis. We are working to lower the number of suicide deaths in North Dakota to zero, we must work together to make North Dakota the healthiest state in the nation, as opposed to the state with the most increases in suicide deaths.

I sincerely thank you for listening and for your ongoing support, and I look forward to your questions.

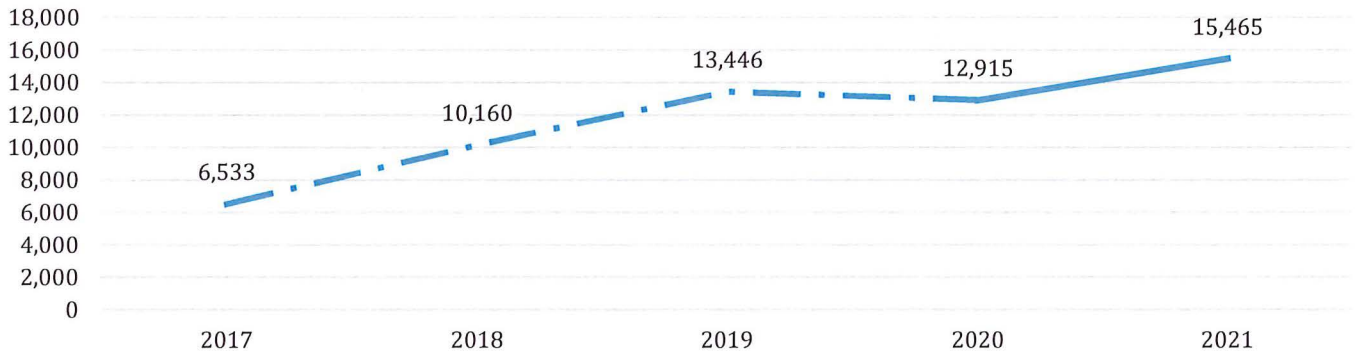


Jennifer Illich  
Executive Director  
FirstLink  
701-293-6462

[jenniferi@myfirstlink.org](mailto:jenniferi@myfirstlink.org)



### ND Contacts Directly Related to Suicide



Dear Chair Weisz and members of the House Human Service Committee,

My testimony is in support of the House Bill 1390. I ask that you give this bill a Do Pass.

I'm a suicide prevention advocate in North Dakota and it is essential that we have the best data possible to understand suicide related deaths in order to prevent them. I assume everyone cares about suicide and would do everything they can to give the people of our state as much hope and resources as possible. So, I understand the main challenge in supporting this kind of legislation may be due to realistic limitations in the capacity and funding of our state.

I've seen the sponsors of this legislation working across all sectors and organizations dedicated to suicide prevention in North Dakota to ensure we're looking at the most effective piece of legislation we can offer. It is designed to seamlessly integrate into our existing structures, work with existing stakeholders to minimize cost on our state, and solve a problem identified by the people doing this work.

As a person doing this work, I can't overstate its value. My role is studying community data and outcomes. I would personally advocate for this bill because the preventative cost of suicide isn't something to overlook. Suicide is rarely an individual impact. It impacts families, communities, and can ripple out throughout our state. It can turn what was a home for decades for some people into a place of painful memories they don't want to come back to.

At time of writing this, according to our state data, suicide is the second highest cause of death for individuals below the age 40 - <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/public-health/health/data-and-statistics/SHA>. We know suicide can be more prevalent with veterans, LGBTQ+ populations, police, and indigenous communities. We know it can be higher for farmers in our state as well for a variety of reasons.

When I think about the cost and effort of a suicide fatality review commission, I think about it as an investment in our state and our future. When I think about suicide prevention, I would love if we could give hope to every person today. And while every effort is made to create space across many sectors in our state to keep people safe and supported, we need this commission to strengthen our downstream suicide prevention efforts.

The data we can learn is invaluable for preventing future suicides that have devastating impacts on communities and families. Please find the capacity to create this and vote Do Pass.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and service to our state

Best regards,  
Faye Seidler

**Testimony on House Bill 1390**  
**House Human Services Committee**  
**January 25, 2023**

Chairman Weisz and Members of the North Dakota House Human Services Committee,

I am writing to urge a “Do Pass” recommendation for HB 1390: relating to the creation of a suicide fatality review commission; and to provide an appropriation.

On October 10, 2022, I lost my husband Erik, 32, to suicide. This happened fewer than two years after his cousin Grant, 20, also died by suicide. Both were raised and died in North Dakota.

The more I learn about suicide the more I find how little we still know about it. My husband knew about crisis hotlines, he had been going to therapy, and had a safety plan. I knew what signs to look for, but he'd exhibited these same warning signs the entire 14 years I knew him. Still he took his own life, and every day I'm left wondering what else I could have or should have done to stop him. While incredible work has been done to destigmatize talking about suicide, I think we still have a far way to go to effectively prevent it.

A commission that takes a comprehensive look at suicides that occur in our state would be able to look for commonalities amongst suicide-related deaths, and give us a much better understanding on how to prevent these deaths in the future.

I urge a “Do Pass” recommendation because this bill gives me hope that we may better grasp the root causes of suicide so we can save lives in North Dakota.

Regards,

Laura Dronen  
420 6th Ave S #308  
Fargo, North Dakota 58103

# Testimony for HB 1390

## Suicide Fatality Review Commission

from Rep. Karla Rose Hanson  
for the House Human Services Committee on 1/25/23

Chairman Weisz and members of the Committee,

My name is Karla Rose Hanson, and I represent District 44. Today, I'm bringing to you HB 1390, which would create a statewide suicide fatality review commission in North Dakota.

The purpose of this commission is to prevent suicides in North Dakota. Suicide is a significant problem in our state, and it is not getting better. For people involved in behavioral health, North Dakota's suicide problem is what keeps them up at night. A review commission focused on suicide would identify solutions to help stem this problem.

### **Suicide is a serious problem in North Dakota. Suicide by the numbers:**

- Our suicide numbers are at an all-time high: 159 North Dakotans died by suicide in 2022.
- Adjusting for population, the rate of suicide in North Dakota remains higher than the national average. North Dakota is ranked the 14<sup>th</sup> worst state for its rate of suicide.
- The rate of suicide is disproportionately high in rural areas, with veterans, with young people, and with people who identify as LGBTQ+.
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for young people in ND (ages 15-24). And it's a growing problem with our youth - research shows nearly 1 in 5 ND high school students seriously considered attempting suicide each year the last few years.
- In 2021, 80% of North Dakotans who died by suicide were male and 20% female. Preliminary 2022 data show an 84/16 split. Women attempt suicide at a higher rate, but men are more likely to succeed because of the lethality of their method.
- The three most common methods of suicide include using a firearm (56%), hanging/strangulation (27%) and poisoning (11%). Firearms are the most lethal method.
- Crisis calls have increased dramatically in the last 10 years. FirstLink has seen a 10-fold increase, taking 1,501 calls related to suicide in 2012 and 15,465 in 2022.
- Hospital data shows 837 suicide attempts in 2022 with an average age of 30.
- In short, far too many North Dakotans have been touched by the pain of suicide.

### **The good news is that suicide is preventable. This commission will identify policies and actions to help prevent suicide.**

- It would operate like ND's four other statewide fatality review commissions for domestic violence deaths, deaths of children, drug deaths, and maternal mortality.

- Each commission, including this one, brings together a variety of perspectives to review cases, identify risk factors in these deaths, and identify opportunities for improvements related to systems, services, and policies.
- Cass & Clay counties currently have a Suicide Fatality Review Commission, which has developed several suggestions for policy and practice improvements. People who work in this space see value in extending the work statewide.

**The bill sets up the key components of the Suicide Fatality Review Commission.**

- In short, the primary components of the bill include establishing the commission’s purpose, identifying the types of records needed for case reviews, articulating the expectations around confidentiality of those records, and listing potential members that may be appointed by the head of the ND Department of Health & Human Services. The commission would have assistance from DHHS, and the commission will issue an annual report of its findings and recommendations.
- Regarding the membership: The bill lists a variety of roles that could be valuable in reviewing cases and making recommendations around improvements to systems, services, and policies. The head of DHHS would have the ability to choose from this list and add other permanent or temporary members.
- Dr. Sens, the chair of pathology at UND and the designated forensic pathologist for 21 eastern counties in ND, believes a statewide suicide fatality review commission is critically needed. She was not able to testify because she is teaching today – but her testimony is online and you might have a printed copy for your reference.
- Because the Suicide Fatality Review Commission would have oversight from DHHS, we enable a stronger tie between the commission’s recommendations and the opportunity to implement those recommendations and ensure our people and financial resources are focused on the most effective suicide prevention solutions.
- Two potential amendments:
  - The committee might consider adding more roles to the list of potential committee members. In reviewing the bill draft, stakeholders have suggested we add the following roles: a legislator, an individual from the LGBTQ+ community, and an individual who works in public health.
  - If HB 1165 passes, the committee might change “executive director” to “commissioner” on lines 8, 10 and 11 of page 1 and lines 13-14 on page 3.

In summary, I would ask the committee to give a Do Pass recommendation to HB 1390. We are not winning the battle against suicide in ND. A suicide fatality review commission would serve as another mechanism to preventing suicide in our state by identifying trends and solutions – helping to prevent the pain that so many families feel when they lose a loved one. Thank you so much for the consideration.

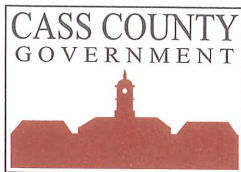
**Testimony**  
**House Bill No. 1390**  
**House Human Services Committee**  
**Representative Robin Weisz, Chairman**  
January 25, 2023

Chairman Robin Weisz, and members of the House Human Services Committee, I am Pamela Sagness, Executive Director of the Behavioral Health Division with the Department of Health and Human Services (Department). I appear before you in support of House Bill No. 1390.

In 2021, 153 North Dakotans died by suicide. This is an increase from 140 individuals in 2020, and 134 North Dakotans who died by suicide in 2019.

This Bill creates a suicide fatality review commission who will review and evaluate the circumstances surrounding deaths by suicide in the State. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publication Suicide Prevention Resource For Action, 2022 states, "Monitoring and evaluation are necessary components of a public health approach to preventing suicide." The monitoring and evaluation completed by this review commission will assist preventing death by suicide in the state.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to try to answer any questions the committee may have. Thank you.



**CASS COUNTY CORONER** Kriste Rehkamp Ross, B.S. F-ABMDI  
1220 25th Street South, Fargo, North Dakota 58103 • Phone: 701-241-5920 • Fax: 701-241-5922 • www.casscountynd.gov

Testimony prepared for:  
**Senate Human Services Committee**  
Prepared January 23, 2023  
Presented March 13, 2023  
Kriste Ross, Coroner  
Cass County Government

RE: House Bill No. 1390

Committee Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kriste Ross, Coroner for Cass County. I am here in support of House Bill 1390.

I began working in the Cass County Coroner’s Office in 2001. Since that time, I have investigated numerous unattended deaths including suicides. After working with families who lost their loved one to suicide, and often trying to understand the “why” that a suicide happens, I reached out to Mary Weiler, founder of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention chapter in North Dakota. I wanted to learn more about how to interact with grieving families, have resources available to support loved ones but even just as important, understanding what could have been done to prevent the suicide.

Over the years, I have kept statistics on suicides, drug overdoses, alcohol-related deaths, homicides, accidental deaths, and deaths of minors. Most of these types of deaths currently have a State Fatality Review Panel. I’ve been involved in local review panels for suicide-related deaths. While the details of how the death occurred are important, it is even more important to know the factors leading up to the death itself. By having these reviews, the information available makes it possible to identify where there are shortcomings in identifying mental health crisis, resources, and educational opportunities.

Statistics show that one death by suicide impacts about 135 family and friends directly. What we also know is that when there is a death in a school, workplace, or church it impacts the co-workers, teachers, student, congregations, and church leaders in a profound way. Some who struggle with mental health issues will need care for months or years to comes. I am in support of this bill as I believe that forming this review committee will do what it can to reduce the number of suicide-related deaths, help provide targeted education based on research and generate specific recommendations to our legislative leaders on what to do for our families, survivors, communities, hospitals, schools, and workplaces.

Sincerely,

Kriste Ross  
Cass County Government, Coroner  
Reference: Cereal et al., 2018 pg. 5

1155 Oxbow Ct,  
Grand Forks, ND 58203

March 11, 2023

Re: HB 1390

Senate Chair Lee and Members of the North Dakota Senate Human Services Committee:

I strongly support HB 1390, the establishment of a suicide fatality review board for suicide deaths in North Dakota. I have presented testimony as part of the House version and remain committed to the need for this committee in North Dakota.

I am a forensic pathologist, Chair of Pathology at UND, Coroner of Grand Forks County, and designated forensic pathologist for 21 Eastern counties in ND by the State Forensic Examiner in Bismarck. For over 40 years, my medical practice is the specialized area of forensic pathology – finding the cause, manner, and circumstances of death. I attend death scene in my County and provide Forensic Pathology services to regional Coroners in ND. Critical to this medical practice is assessment of preventability of deaths and feedback for public health and safety initiatives to reduced these deaths. This panel, drawn largely of citizen volunteers, each with a particular area of interest and expertise, can start to address this growing epidemic.

Suicide likely has (or will) affect every person in this room. When you experience the devastation these deaths have to family, friends, society, it becomes imperative to act. The demographics, triggers, risks, and signs of suicide are evolving. Panels like the one proposed provide an effective mechanism to study these evolving variables, recommend, create and monitor effectiveness. Panels such as these are more diverse and effective then single agencies, no matter how dedicated, can be. The synergy of panel and broad base of involvement is the very key to success in other areas and in other locals.

Many of the supporters work with families daily as they try to process the unfathomable events. Some of us, like myself, may have to deliver the shattering news that guts a family, forever changing the soul of family members. I am still haunted by the wails of parents losing a child to a preventable and unimaginable consequence. We can do better. We must do better.

Please recommend a “DO PASS” for this important step to support North Dakota citizens.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Ann Sens, MD, PhD



HB 1390 - Yes

Senator Lee and Committee Members,

My name is Theresa Deckert and I am from Devils Lake. I serve on the board of our county's Suicide Prevention Coalition, lead a Suicide Loss support group and co-chair the Lake Region Out of the Darkness Walk. Our small community of Devils Lake and surrounding areas has raised over \$70,000 for suicide prevention and awareness in the last 5 years that we have been a walk site. Our community has been greatly impacted by suicide. The funds raised show this is an area that our community cares about.

I got involved with suicide prevention after losing my younger brother to suicide in 2014. My life was changed at that instant. Through working with other loss survivors, the common question is, "What can we do to insure other families do not have to go through such a tragedy?"

Our group has discussed the need for some sort of a commission that would review deaths and compile data about suicide. I was so encouraged when I found this bill. Thank you so much Senators Lee and Hogan for co-sponsoring it.

Suicide and suicide attempts are at an alarming high. We need to do all we can as a state to curtail this increasing crisis. Maybe through collecting and studying data we can have a better understanding which will help to save lives.

Please give this bill a "do pass" recommendation!

Theresa Deckert  
Devils Lake, ND  
District 15  
701-662-4790

# Testimony for HB 1390

## Suicide Fatality Review Commission

from Rep. Karla Rose Hanson  
for the Senate Human Services Committee on 3/13/23

Chair Lee and members of the Committee,

My name is Karla Rose Hanson, and I represent District 44. Today, I'm bringing to you HB 1390, which would create a statewide suicide fatality review commission in North Dakota.

**The purpose of this commission is to prevent suicides in North Dakota.** Suicide is a significant problem in our state, and it is not getting better. For people in behavioral health, North Dakota's suicide problem is what keeps them up at night. A review commission that is focused on suicide would **identify targeted interventions** to help stem this problem.

### **Suicide is a serious problem in North Dakota. Suicide by the numbers:**

- Suicides are at an all-time high: 159 North Dakotans died by suicide in 2022.
- Adjusting for population, the rate of suicide in North Dakota remains higher than the national average. North Dakota is ranked the 14<sup>th</sup> worst state for its rate of suicide.
- The rate of suicide is disproportionately high in rural areas and with veterans, young people, and people who identify as LGBTQ+. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for young people in ND (ages 15-24).
- Women attempt suicide at a higher rate, but men are more likely to succeed. In 2021, 80% of North Dakotans who died by suicide in were male and 20% female.
- Crisis calls have increased dramatically in the last 10 years. FirstLink saw a 10-fold increase, taking 1,501 calls related to suicide in 2012 and 15,465 in 2022.
- ND hospital data shows 837 suicide attempts in 2022 with an average age of 30.
- The result: far too many North Dakotans have been touched by the pain of suicide.

While these and other statistics tell us who is dying by suicide, we don't always know why. A suicide fatality review commission will enable a group of people with relevant experience to analyze these cases on a qualitative level – to see what was or wasn't happening 30, 60 or 90 days before the death – and look at the full person.

### **The hopeful news is that suicide is preventable. This commission will identify policies and actions to help prevent suicide.**

- It would operate like ND's four other statewide fatality review commissions for domestic violence deaths, deaths of children, drug deaths, and maternal mortality.

- Each commission, including this one, brings together a variety of perspectives to review cases, identify risk factors and protective factors in these deaths, and identify opportunities for targeted improvements related to systems, services, and policies.
- Having a statewide suicide fatality review commission is considered a best practice by the CDC and by other states.
- Cass & Clay counties currently have a suicide fatality review commission, which has developed several suggestions for local policy and practice improvements.
- People who work in this space see value in doing this work statewide. For example, Dr. Sens, the chair of pathology at UND and the designated forensic pathologist for 21 eastern counties in ND, believes a statewide suicide fatality review commission is critically needed. She is teaching today but her testimony is available for you to read.

**The bill sets up the key components of the Suicide Fatality Review Commission.**

- In short, the primary components of the bill include:
  - Establishing the commission’s purpose,
  - Identifying the types of records needed for case reviews,
  - Articulating expectations around confidentiality of those records, and
  - Listing potential members that may be appointed by the head of the ND Department of Health & Human Services. The membership is flexible. The bill lists a variety of roles that could be valuable in reviewing cases and making recommendations around improvements to systems, services, and policies. The head of DHHS would have the ability to choose from this list and add other permanent or temporary members to ensure the right people are at the table to analyze these cases and recommend targeted interventions.
- The commission would have assistance from DHHS, and the commission will issue an annual report of its findings and recommendations. This is also important: Because the Suicide Fatality Review Commission would have oversight from DHHS, we enable a stronger tie between the commission’s recommendations and the opportunity to implement those recommendations in service delivery. This helps us focus our people and financial resources on the most effective suicide prevention solutions.
- Two potential amendments:
  - If HB 1165 passes, the committee might change “executive director” to “commissioner” on lines 8, 10 and 11 of page 1 and lines 13-14 on page 3.
  - The committee might consider adding more roles to the list of potential committee members. Stakeholders suggested we add a legislator, an individual from the LGBTQ+ community, and a public health professional.

In summary, I would ask the committee to give a Do Pass recommendation to HB 1390. We are not winning the battle against suicide in ND. A suicide fatality review commission would serve as another mechanism to preventing suicide in our state by identifying trends and targeted solutions – helping to prevent the pain that too many families feel when they lose a loved one. Thank you so much for the consideration.

Dear Chair Lee and the members of the Senate Human Service Committee,

My testimony is in support of the House Bill 1390. I ask that you give this bill a "Do Pass".

I'm a suicide prevention advocate in North Dakota and it is essential that we have the best data possible to understand suicide related deaths in order to prevent them. I assume everyone cares about suicide and would do everything they can to give the people of our state as much hope and resources as possible. So, I understand the main challenge in supporting this kind of legislation may be due to realistic limitations in the capacity and funding of our state.

So, let me tell you that I've seen the sponsors of this legislation working across all sectors and organizations dedicated to suicide prevention in North Dakota to ensure we're looking at the most effective piece of legislation possible. This was a well crafted document designed to seamlessly integrate into our existing structures, work with existing stakeholders to minimize cost on our state, and solve a problem identified by those experts.

As a person doing this work, I can't overstate its value. My role is studying community data and outcomes. I would personally advocate for this bill because the preventative cost of suicide isn't something to overlook. Suicide impacts families, communities, and can ripple out throughout our state. It can turn what was a home for decades for some people into a place of painful memories they don't want to come back to.

At time of writing this, according to our state data, suicide is the second highest cause of death for individuals below the age 40 - <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/public-health/health/data-and-statistics/SHA>. We know suicide can be more prevalent with veterans, LGBTQ+ populations, police, and indigenous communities. We know it can be higher for farmers in our state as well for a variety of reasons.

When I think about the cost and effort of a suicide fatality review commission, I think about it as an investment in our state and our future. When I think about suicide prevention, I would love if we could give hope to every person today. And while every effort is made to create space across many sectors in our state to keep people safe and supported, we need this commission to strengthen our downstream suicide prevention efforts.

The data we can learn here is invaluable for preventing future suicides that will have devastating impacts on communities and families. Please find the capacity to create this and vote "Do Pass".

Thank you for your time, consideration, and service to our state

Best regards,  
Faye Seidler

## HB 1390

My name is Joe Hall, I am President of the North Dakota Veterans Legislative Council (NDVLC).

The NDVLC supports this bill and requests a DO PASS for HB 1390.

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.

## 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.

**Testimony**  
**House Bill No. 1390**  
**Senate Human Services Committee**  
**Senator Judy Lee, Chairman**  
March 13, 2023

Chairman Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, I am Pamela Sagness, Executive Director of the Behavioral Health Division with the Department of Health and Human Services (Department). I appear before you in support of House Bill No. 1390.

In 2021, 153 North Dakotans died by suicide. This is an increase from 140 individuals in 2020, and 134 North Dakotans who died by suicide in 2019.

This Bill creates a suicide fatality review commission who will review and evaluate the circumstances surrounding deaths by suicide in the State. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publication Suicide Prevention Resource For Action, 2022 states, "Monitoring and evaluation are necessary components of a public health approach to preventing suicide." The monitoring and evaluation completed by this review commission will assist preventing death by suicide in the state.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to try to answer any questions the committee may have. Thank you.