Testimony

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NUR 960 Seminar and Practicum

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March 31, 2023

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Good morning, Senator Kevin Cramer and esteemed members of the committee.

I am Kari Bernhardt, a resident of Bismarck, ND, and a registered nurse working in the emergency department of a local hospital. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today in support of increased funding for mental health resources in North Dakota. As someone who has personally experienced mental illness and as a healthcare provider who has seen the devastating effects of the mental health crisis, I urge you to consider the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 and a comprehensive approach to addressing the mental health crisis in our state.

Mental health is a critical issue that affects millions of Americans each year. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States and in North Dakota, suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10-34 years old.

Having personally experienced mental illness, I am intimately familiar with the difficulties of navigating the mental health system in North Dakota. In my early twenties, I experienced a severe episode of depression that left me feeling hopeless and even suicidal at times. During my time of crisis, I struggled to find the help I needed and was overwhelmed by the complex and often fragmented mental health system. It took me nearly six months and two emergency department visits before I found the support I needed. Unfortunately, not everyone is as fortunate as I was. I have seen friends and family members struggle to access the care they need, facing long wait times for appointments or being turned away due to a lack of available resources.

As a healthcare provider, I often face the challenge of connecting patients to available mental health resources. Unfortunately, mental health resources in our state are scarce, with 81% of communities not having enough mental health providers to serve their residents. This lack of resources often leads to long wait times for appointments or even being turned away from receiving necessary care. As a result, many individuals are forced to turn to the Emergency Department, where care can be alarmingly long, sometimes exceeding 48 hours, leading to poorer outcomes, and overcrowding of the healthcare system.

The implementation of the three-digit dialing code 9-8-8 for mental health emergencies is a crucial step in improving mental health care access. It simplifies the process of seeking help, connecting individuals to trained professionals who can offer immediate support and assistance. By designating 9-8-8 as the national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline, individuals experiencing mental health emergencies can get the help they need quickly, reducing the risk of harm and potentially saving lives. This important legislation also reduces the stigma associated with seeking help, increasing awareness of mental health crises. However, to improve access to mental health resources, North Dakota must increase mental health funding. With additional funding, the state can establish crisis response teams and mental health clinics that offer personalized, accessible, and affordable care to people in need. Additionally, increasing mental health funding can encourage individuals to seek behavioral health professions, which can help to address the shortage of mental health providers in the state

This is why I am here today to show my support for the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 and advocate for an increase in mental health funding in North Dakota. I firmly believe that everyone should have access to timely and appropriate mental healthcare, regardless of their circumstances or background. By implementing a three-digit dialing code and boosting mental health funding, we can ensure that people in crisis receive the necessary care and support. The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, if passed, would be a crucial step towards addressing the mental health crisis in the United States. This legislation would simplify the process of seeking help during a crisis and could potentially reduce the number of suicides in the country.

I urge you to support this critical piece of legislation. It is time for our country to prioritize mental health care and to ensure that everyone has access to the resources they need to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Thank you for your time and consideration.