




2026

SESSION REPORT





Together we can speak
with a strong voice-
the *Family Voice*

SOUTH DAKOTA

The 2026 Legislative Session

The South Dakota Legislature is one of the most accessible government bodies in the nation. We have the ability to speak truth to leaders of our state and advocate for Biblical truth in ways that many do not. It is an incredible privilege to live here, but we must not forget that this blessing comes with a responsibility:

“...For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required...”

-Luke 12:48

Your voice matters.

Inside this report you will find details on the 20+ pieces of legislation that the Family Voice team took action on, but it was only possible because of people like you. The pro-family movement continues to take ground because active and engaged citizens are remaining vigilant.

We are incredibly grateful for the friends across South Dakota who joined us this session in standing up for truth – who took action to advance the cause of faith, family and freedom.

This year stands as a powerful testament to what we can achieve together, marked by significant victories for the pro-family cause. The commitment, perseverance, and hard work of our team are evident on every page as we fight together to keep our state free. Now is the time to come celebrate these accomplishments and the impact they represent.

-The Family Voice (Action) Team



Norman Woods, Director, testifies before a House committee



Don Haggar, Lobbyist for Family Voice Action, testifies before a House committee



SB190 – An act to protect parental rights

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass

Sponsored by Senator Tamara Grove (R-26), this bill is about one key question: **who has the final say in raising a child—parents or the government?**

In South Dakota, parental rights aren't clearly or strongly protected in law. Parents' rights can be overridden far too easily and often have no real recourse when institutions overstep.

The bill would:

- Apply **strict scrutiny**, meaning the government must prove a compelling reason and use the least restrictive means before it can override parental decisions.
- Clearly define parental rights as fundamental, backed by cases like *Troxel v. Granville*, where the Supreme Court case affirmed parents' fundamental right to control their children's upbringing.

- Give parents more control over education and medical decisions for their children.
- Provide a legal path to fight back if parent's rights are violated.

Legislation like this has passed in 22 states, and more than 30 states have clearly stated that parental rights are fundamental. A majority of states already apply the strict scrutiny standard through law or court rulings. Only 11 states lack this clarity, and South Dakota is one of them. As John Adams put it: The foundation of national morality must be laid in private families.



Senator Tamara Grove defends SB190 on the Senate Floor

Bottom line: It's about making parental authority clear, protected, and enforceable, not assumed.

The bill passed the Senate 19–15, but failed in the House 30–35

Strict Scrutiny:

The standard of strict scrutiny is applied to a government action when that action infringes on a citizen's fundamental right. For example, if the government takes an action that violates your freedom of speech, that action is subject to strict scrutiny.

When strict scrutiny is applied, the government must prove two things before moving forward. The state must show that it:

1. Has a "compelling state interest" to take action (like public safety)
2. Has used the "least restrictive means," or least burdensome option

What does this look like in real life? Here's an example:

For the Amish, using modern technology violates their religious beliefs. As a result, their buggies do not have headlights or tail lights. This was a problem because other cars could not

see them. The government had a "compelling state interest" (safety of everyone on the road) to require the buggies to be lit. However, requiring the buggies to be outfitted with reflective tape was not the "least restrictive means" to accomplish this goal. The compromise? Reflective tape. Requiring the buggies to be outfitted with reflective tape accomplished the government's interest in safety, while only placing a minor burden on the religious practice of the Amish drivers.

HB1275 - An act to require age verification or parental consent for app store downloads

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass

Sponsored by Representative John Hughes (R-13), HB1275 was our second attempt at passing age verification at the app store level. The principle behind this bill is quite simple: kids cannot sign contracts.

The bill required three main things:

1. **Accurate** age-ratings of applications
2. **One-time** age-verification before signing digital agreements
3. **Parental** approval for app downloads in the case of a minor

Here's how it works:

Scenario #1:

A parent setting up a smartphone for their child

When a parent sets up a new smartphone for their child, they simply indicate the child's age category. There's no need to provide the child's birthday or upload personal data because the phone just needs to know the general age range.

The next day, if the child tries to download a monster-truck game, the download might pause because the app requires agreement to its "terms of service," which the child isn't legally old enough to accept on their own.

The parent receives a notification asking for consent, along with a brief summary of the app's content and its recommended age. Once the parent approves, the child can download the app, ensuring parental oversight without unnecessary data collection.

Scenario #2:

An adult with an existing smartphone

For most adults, age verification is straightforward. If you've previously made purchases in the app store or have a credit card linked to a digital wallet, your age is already confirmed, no additional steps are needed.

For devices or platforms that require extra verification, there are multiple unobtrusive options available, and the law explicitly allows companies to use any reliable method they choose. Once your age is verified, it's a one-time process, and you won't need to repeat it for future downloads or app use.

An important note: the legislation did not require anyone to upload their ID into a database and put strict protections on any information gathered by the company.

The legislation has been endorsed by over 170 child-advocacy groups across the nation, including Heritage Action, the ACLJ, Moms for Liberty, and more. Here in South Dakota, it was endorsed by a number of our allies, including the Attorney General, the Catholic Conference, Concerned Women for America, Call to Freedom, and others.

The bill passed the House on a vote of 50-17 before being defeated in a Senate committee 4-5.

To read the coalition letter signed by 170+ child-advocacy groups, scan here:





Life

HB1182 - An act to require the Department of Health to collect reports related to assisted reproductive technology

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass

It is estimated that of all the human embryos created in a lab, only 7% will live. The other 93% will be discarded, frozen forever, “selectively reduced” (aborted), or pass away because of an unsuccessful implantation attempt. HB1182, sponsored by Representative Terri Jorgenson (R-29), would have been a step toward increased transparency and reporting by healthcare institutions involved in embryo creation.

The legislation required that the Department of Health collect reports from the healthcare institutions (not from individual families) on statistics such as:

- The number of embryos created
- The number of embryos that were frozen, discarded or donated
- The number of embryos that were intentionally destroyed
- The number of successful pregnancies and live-births

The legislation failed on the House floor on a vote of 25-42

HB1274 - An act to prohibit the sale, distribution, or advertisement of abortion pills

This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

Last year, South Dakotans were shocked to see abortion advertisements placed at gas station pumps. The ads asked: “Pregnant? Don’t want to be?” This was especially surprising since elective abortions are illegal in South Dakota.

In response to the ads, the South Dakota Attorney General issued a “cease and desist” letter to Mayday Health (the company who placed the advertisements), sparking a series of legal battles.

Meanwhile, the Governor and the Attorney General’s office began reviewing state laws to determine if further action was needed. Their answer: HB1274, which was sponsored by Representative John Hughes (R-13).e legislation makes it crystal clear that “No person may knowingly dispense, distribute, sell, or advertise” any drugs, substances, or instruments for the purpose of an abortion.

The bill passed the House 61-5 and the Senate 31-2

HB1257 - An act to further clarify that treatment for miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy is not considered abortion

This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

Following confusion during the Amendment G ballot campaign, Representative Leslie Heinemann (R-25) introduced HB1257 to provide additional clarity to South Dakota's abortion laws. During the 2025 campaign, proponents of Amendment G—the measure that would have allowed abortion through all nine months—claimed that current law prevents doctors from treating women experiencing miscarriages or ectopic pregnancies.

These claims were false. South Dakota law has always permitted medically necessary treatments in these situations. HB1257 explicitly includes miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy in state law to make clear for both medical professionals and the public what has long been true: prohibiting elective abortion does not restrict care for miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy.

The bill passed the House 60-6 and the Senate 31-2

HB1313 - An act to require the inclusion of an educational video in public school curriculum showing prenatal growth and development

This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

Representative Tony Kayser (R-14) introduced a bill to require that public schools in South Dakota include, at some point in their curriculum, a short animated video that shows how a baby develops in the womb and outlines each stage of human development.

The legislation directs the Board of Education Standards to produce recommendations for health or science curricula, including a high-definition ultrasound video and an animated educational video depicting a baby's progress and development. Once published, school districts can select from the recommended resources and tailor them to their curriculum.

The bill passed the House 52-10 and the Senate 31-3

To read more about the legal victories against Mayday Health, scan here:



HB1212 - An act to apply criminal penalties to post-abortive mothers

This was a harmful bill

that did not pass

This year legislation was introduced to apply criminal penalties to a mother who kills her unborn child through abortion. HB1212 – introduced by Representative Tony Randolph (R-35) and Senator John Carley (R-29), sparked discussion and debate among pro-life friends as they wrestled with the moral, legal, and practical realities surrounding the question of abortion.

SD Family Voice Action did not support this piece of legislation, and has traditionally opposed the application of criminal penalties to the mother for a number of reasons. We were not alone on this decision, but worked alongside allies such as the SD Catholic Conference, Concerned Women for America, SD Right to Life, and a host of national allies.

Continue reading to find:

- 1 – A summary of the proponents' arguments
- 2 – An examination of principles vs. consequences
- 3 – Practical questions that must be answered
- 4 – Moral questions we must weigh

Proponents of HB1212 – The effort to “abolish abortion”

Proponents of the legislation make fairly straightforward moral claims about how our laws should be written. They accurately assert that abortion is murder, and argue that South Dakota law should apply criminal penalties to all murder.

A. Abortion is murder

+

B. Murder is wrong

+

**C. The state should punish wrongdoing
*therefore***

The state should punish, with criminal penalties, everyone involved in an abortion

HB1212 Continued...



The argument against HB1212

Before unpacking the arguments against enforcing criminal penalties against the mother, we propose five key assertions/facts:

- We must pursue justice
- We must work to save as many lives as possible
- Our decisions cannot be divorced from the results that come from them
- Many women are deceived by the industry
- Many women are coerced into an abortion

Proponents of HB1212 agree with some or all of these five, but have come to vastly different answers to the questions “What should we do next?” and “How do we save as many lives as possible?”

Ideas have consequences – Bad ideas have victims

Decisions of public policy cannot be made in a vacuum. When crafting laws and setting policy, we cannot only ask if the policy seems right, we must also ask what the potential consequences will be. If we make a decision that brings bad results, are we responsible for those results?

The answer: it depends

For example: If a legislator has no real way of knowing their bill would bring bad results, we could argue they are not responsible for those bad results. If, however, there was clear evidence or warning of bad results, the person is arguably responsible for them.

The sentiment “Do what’s right, no matter the consequences” does not absolve a person from the fault of making a decision that victimizes others. The “consequences”

mentioned in this classic adage are personal consequences: the cost to you, the price you pay, the sacrifice that may be required of you personally. It is a call to courage and sacrifice – not a blanket permission for a person to act as they see fit, no matter the result to others.

Tying this analysis into the pro-life public-policy debate, Chris Maska, J.D. writes:

A law should be judged by whether it achieves its intended purpose. It is, therefore, important to determine what is the purpose of criminal laws against abortion. The principle reason for laws against abortion is that abortion is the killing of an innocent human being. It is wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being. The purpose of laws against abortion is to stop the killing of innocent human beings. This purpose is only fulfilled if a law actually decreases abortions.

A theoretically perfect law against abortion that does not stop abortion has failed to achieve the purpose for which it was enacted. It would be better to have a law that while not theoretically perfect, actually stopped abortions or at least stopped more abortions than a theoretically perfect law.

Further, perhaps after the less-than-perfect law has been in effect for some time and the law’s teaching function has changed public perceptions, it might then be possible to enact the theoretically better law and in time it might also be the practically better law.

Mr. Maska underlines the primary question: Does a law actually decrease abortions? We cannot create public policy in a vacuum – it must be crafted and adopted to achieve positive results in our society.

HB1212 Continued...

Examining the practical questions at hand

The Abortion Pill Rescue Program

Heartbeat International reported last year that over 7,000 lives have been saved through the Abortion Pill Rescue Program. This program is a “last chance rescue” for mothers who have taken the first abortion pill, but want to save the baby.

A practical question that must be answered: If criminal penalties are applied to mothers, will they call a hotline and ask for help after they have made a bad decision? The likely answer: no. It is reasonable to assume that these mothers will not reach out for help, and will not come forward to access the emergency care their babies need.

The complications of the abortion pill

For years, the abortion industry has claimed that taking the abortion pills was safe and that the experience was “similar to a bad period.” They claimed the pills were as safe as taking ibuprofen for a headache. A 2025 groundbreaking report from the Ethics and Public Policy Center proved what doctors and pregnancy help center staff members already knew: the abortion pill is dangerous. In fact, the number of women who experience serious adverse effects from them are 22x higher than the abortion industry had been claiming.

A practical question that needs to be answered: If criminal penalties are applied to mothers who make a bad decision and take the pill, will they seek medical attention in a timely fashion? **The likely answer: no.**

The Pregnancy Help Centers

Pregnancy Help Centers have been on the frontlines of the pro-life effort for decades, and have proven to be one of the most effective ways of reaching women in crisis. They open their doors to all, and see incredible fruit from their labor. The stories are endless of mothers and fathers who walk through the door, meet with a caring nurse or counselor, and become committed to raising their child and becoming the parent their child needs.

A practical question that must be answered: If criminal penalties are threatened against a mother who is seeking help, will she be more or less likely to reach out to a pregnancy center for help? **The likely answer: dramatically less**

All three of the above scenarios have a common thread: the passage of legislation like HB1212 would reduce or eliminate our chances of reaching a woman in need and saving their baby.

Prosecution of the doctor

One practical reason that criminal penalties were applied to the doctor and not the woman is the need for testimony in court. If penalties are applied to both the woman and the doctor, the doctor has a higher chance of avoiding prosecution. Doctors performing abortions would be able to threaten mothers by explaining “*We are bound together. If you ever tell anyone we will both go to jail.*” If mothers know this threat is false, they are more likely to come forward and provide critical testimony necessary to convict the doctor.

Proponents of legislation like HB1212 make a similar claim in the opposite direction. They assert that if we have no penalties to apply, we have no tools to use in making a deal with the mother for her testimony –

HB1212 Continued...

deal with the mother for her testimony – essentially claiming that she has no reason to come forward or to take action against the doctor. This assertion vastly underestimates the guilt felt by mothers who were deceived or coerced into having an abortion. We hear pro-choice women encouraging each other to “shout your abortion” – but we have seen time and again the passion of post-abortive women who **shout the truth** because they previously had an abortion.

Public referendum – direct or delayed

Here in America we have the ability to reverse something that our elected officials have done either by referring a new law to a vote, starting a petition drive for an initiated measure (or constitutional amendments), or by electing new leaders who would reverse a decision. When examining the question of criminal penalties for mothers, we must ask ourselves: After the voters have seen examples of young women being sent to jail because their boyfriend coerced them into having an abortion, would the pro-abortion lobby be **more likely** or **less likely** to successfully add abortion into our constitution by initiated amendment? **The answer: more likely.**

The above realities highlight why a policy change that promotes justice in theory, would bring harmful and unjust results – thus calling into question whether the policy change is actually moral and just. In addition to these factors – which could all be categorized as arguments based on results or consequences – we must also continue examining the moral principles at hand and ask whether or not this law is just.

Moral questions we must weigh in our pursuit of justice

Punishment for someone under coercion

It is a widely known fact that most mothers who chose abortion made their decision under coercion – they did not freely make their decision. Studies show that coercion and pressure are present 70% of the time. With coercion this prevalent, we must ask – is it just to pursue criminal penalties on a population that is under this level of coercion? **Clearly the answer is no.**

Penalty as deterrent

Penalties are often added to provide a deterrent – to serve as a motivator against a person making a certain choice. As mentioned above, most women make an abortion decision under coercion. Deterring someone from making a decision is only possible if they are freely making that decision.

The law is a teacher

While it is true that “politics is downstream of culture” it is also true that when governments enact laws, the laws serve as guides to culture. The law communicates to citizens what is expected vs. what is prohibited, and makes judgements on what is good vs. what is bad. Proponents of legislation like HB1212 point to this fact, and assert that for society to truly become pro-life, we must show citizens (using criminal penalties) that abortion is murder.

While it is true that “politics is downstream of culture,” it is equally true that laws shape culture. Law communicates what is expected and what is prohibited. It reflects judgments about what is good and what is wrong.

HB1212 Continued...

Proponents of legislation like HB1212 rely on this principle, arguing that for society to truly become pro-life, the law must treat abortion as murder, including through criminal penalties.

But this argument overlooks the full weight of its own premise. If the law is a teacher, then for decades it has been teaching something very different. For nearly 50 years, legal precedent signaled that abortion was acceptable. That message was reinforced in classrooms, where students were often taught that abortion was permissible or that an unborn child “wasn’t a baby yet.” Many heard similar claims from trusted medical professionals.

This raises a difficult but necessary question: if a young woman has been shaped by decades of legal, educational, and medical messaging that abortion is acceptable and not the taking of a human life, is it just to impose criminal penalties on her for acting on that understanding?

The pro-life movement has long emphasized the importance of education and cultural change. Given the depth of confusion created over time, criminal penalties are not the most effective path forward. If the goal is to build a culture that values life, the focus should remain on informing, persuading, and supporting rather than punishing.



Scan here to read a coalition letter signed by national allies such as:

- Americans United for Life
- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
- The Southern Baptist Convention



United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops





HB1127 - An act to allow certified professional midwives to supervise birthing centers

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass

This legislation, sponsored by Representative Bethany Soye (R-09), would have made two key changes to South Dakota law:

ONE: Enabled certified professional midwives (CPM's) to supervise birthing centers. The laws governing birthing centers were written before CPM's were added to the list of people who are permitted by law to deliver babies. This legislation would have connected the two sections of code, and allowed CPM's to supervise births in a birthing center rather than being restricted to only home-births.

TWO: Removed the 30-minute travel requirement. Currently, birthing centers are required to be within a 30-minute drive of a hospital. Given the rural nature of our state, this requirement has prohibited midwives from opening centers inside of South Dakota's "maternity deserts" - areas where no prenatal help or medical assistance is available.

The bill failed in committee 2-11

HB1153 - An act to protect the conscience rights of doctors and nurses

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass

This legislation, introduced by Representative Leslie Heinemann (D-25), would have protected the conscience rights of medical professionals, and safeguarded their ability to "do no harm." A medical professional should never be forced to choose between their faith and their job.

The legislation would have:

Protected healthcare professionals and the healthcare institutions where they work from being mandated to participate in a specific procedure that violates their ethical or religious beliefs. Some professionals are asked to carry out medical procedures such as embryo destruction, cosmetic genital surgeries, sterilizations, and others against their faith and their conscience.

Protected medical professionals from discrimination—like losing their jobs or facing criminal charges—based on their ethical or religious beliefs.

Enhanced patient care by safeguarding free speech, including protecting whistleblowers who report violations.

The bill failed on the House floor on a vote of 25-41

2026 LEGISLATIVE INTERNS



Ida Carrette

Ida joined us from Dell Rapids for a week at the Capitol. With a background in TeenPact, she already had a solid understanding of the legislative process, but she said the experience helped her see how it actually works in real time. In particular, she gained a deeper appreciation for how important the precise language of a bill is, as well as the many rules and procedures that most people are unaware of. Reflecting on her experience, Ida said, “It was really cool to meet a lot of legislators who weren’t my own. I know the people in my district, but it was cool to meet members of the broader House and Senate.” She also noted the hands-on nature of advocacy work, adding, “I learned a lot about what a lobbyist does. There’s a lot of footwork involved, meeting new people and actively seeking them out.”



Elizabeth Kowalchuk & Nasaya Frie

These two young women, both TeenPact alumni, joined the Family Voice team for a week at the Capitol.

Nasaya described the experience as a “deep dive,” noting that while TeenPact helped her get her feet wet, her time shadowing provided a much more in-depth and eye-opening perspective. Elizabeth was struck by how accessible the legislature is and especially enjoyed the opportunity to have friendly, conversational interactions with both legislators and lobbyists.

We had a great week with these outstanding young women, and we even discovered that Nasaya is a crack shot bowler.



Elsa Bisschop

Week 4 brought us Elsa, and she hit the ground running. Within minutes of arriving at the Capitol, she found herself in a meeting with the Speaker of the House. During her time, Elsa gained a deeper understanding of how critical bill language is and was pleasantly surprised by how approachable and personable legislators are.

Elsa is incredibly capable, a quick learner, and fun to be around, which was evident throughout her time with the team. Elsa testified before the House State Affairs Committee, advocating for privacy protections in women’s bathrooms. No woman should have to share a bathroom with a man pretending to be female. Drawing on her personal experience in the performing arts, she made a compelling case against the measure and helped kill this dangerous bill.

2026 LEGISLATIVE INTERNS

Callie Kinsella & Kinley Manning

These two girls joined the Family Voice team to shadow at the Capitol after hearing about the accessibility of the legislature and the importance of defending Truth in government through the Stanley County Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Fort Pierre. During their time, they were able to experience the legislative process up close and see firsthand what takes place inside the Capitol building just across the river from their school.



Dawson Schroeder

A college student at South Dakota State University and president of the SDSU College Republicans, Dawson joined the team for two weeks at the Capitol. After enjoying his experience last year, he returned this session for an even deeper look at the legislative process. Reflecting on both 2025 and 2026, Dawson noted the contrast between the beginning and end of session, highlighting how each phase brings a different pace and set of priorities.

He especially enjoyed observing the work of the Legislative Research Council as they collaborated with legislators and lobbyists to draft bills and translate policy ideas into legally sound language. Dawson was a tremendous help during our Day at the Capitol, leading tours, creating a scavenger hunt for students, and capturing photos for our content portfolio.

He also emphasized how accessible the legislative process is in South Dakota, saying, "You have so much access to the Capitol and to your legislature. It's incredible. Anyone can come and testify and make their voice heard." We look forward to seeing where he lands after he completes his degree.



Ida's intern video



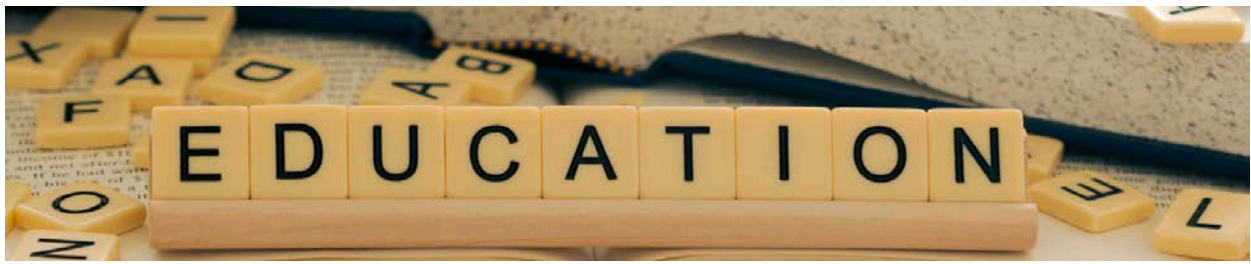
Elizabeth and Nasaya's intern video



Elsa's intern video



Dawson's intern video



HB1158 - An act to place additional regulation on homeschool families

This was a harmful bill that was withdrawn by the sponsor

Sponsored by Representative Tim Goodwin (R-30), the bill would have imposed two additional requirements on homeschool families:

- Annual notification of intent to homeschool
- Standardized testing for students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11

Both of these requirements were previously in place but were repealed in 2021 through SB 177 (a bill that provided more homeschooling freedoms). Lawmakers removed them after recognizing that they placed unnecessary burdens on families without providing meaningful educational benefits.

The bill was withdrawn by the prime sponsor, presumably due to lack of support

HB1206 - An act to prohibit state funds or scholarships for homeschool families

This was a harmful bill that was withdrawn by the sponsor

This bill, sponsored by Representative Al Novstrup (R-03), would have placed a prohibition on certain families from receiving any state funds for the purpose of educating their children. Currently in South Dakota, no funds are available to families who are educating their children under the “alternative instruction” laws.

“Alternative instruction” is the legal term for the families who are not using the public school or attending a private school. Although most families in this category are homeschool families, there are a number of small unaccredited schools operating under these laws as well. If funds are someday made available, this legislation would prohibit all “alternative instruction” families from taking advantage of scholarships.

The bill was withdrawn by the prime sponsor, presumably due to lack of support



To learn more about this legislation and the challenges associated with past reporting and testing requirements, scan the QR code.

SB84 - An act to expand eligibility for the Partners in Education private school scholarship program

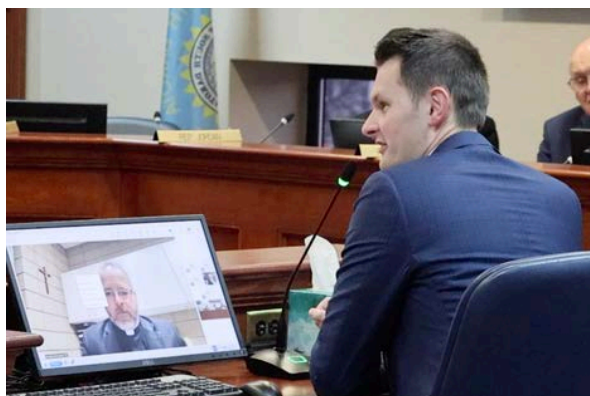
This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

The Partners in Education Scholarship Program was started in 2016, which provides scholarships to low-income families who are seeking to attend a private school. In the 2025-26 school years, there were 48 schools participating in the program, and nearly \$5 million distributed in scholarships.

SB84, sponsored by Senator Sue Peterson (R-13), made two key changes to the scholarship program:

- Expanded eligibility, enabling more families to qualify for the scholarships
- Expanded scholarship flexibility, giving the Partners in Education Board the ability to give larger scholarships if the need arises

The bill passed the Senate 34-0 and the House 65-0



Norman Woods testifies before a House committee, advocating for SB84

SB198 - Restricting Cellphone Use in the Classroom

This was a good piece of legislation that did not pass



Introduced by Senator Chris Karr (R-11), the bill would have required students to keep cellphones put away for the entire school day, reducing distractions and helping restore focus in the classroom.

Schools that have implemented similar policies are seeing measurable results.

Higher Academic Performance: Research shows that removing phones from the classroom can significantly improve outcomes. Even among lower-performing students, test scores have increased by up to 14 percent after cellphone restrictions were put in place (Glass and Kang, 2019).

Increased Testing Integrity: According to one study, 65 percent of students report having seen another student use a smartphone to cheat on a test (Morin, 2019).

Decrease in Behavioral Incidents: Staff in schools that have removed phones report a lower frequency of student behavioral incidents.

The bill passed the Senate 19-15 but failed on the House floor on a vote of 28-39



HB1161 - An act to remove privacy protections from government buildings or theatres

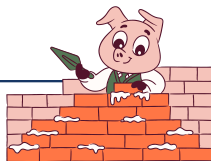
This was a harmful bill

that did not pass

This legislation, sponsored by Representative David Kull (R-02), sought to remove privacy protections from any rooms used exclusively by firefighters, law enforcement personnel, musical and theatrical entertainers, or any rooms used for a governmental regulatory purpose.

This proposal would have removed key privacy protections established in 2025. That law required that bodily privacy be protected in private spaces such as restrooms and overnight accommodations, both in public school settings and other government buildings. HB 1161, as originally introduced, would have eliminated a significant portion of those protections.

The bill was defeated in a House committee on a 5–7 vote.



“Hoghouse”

“Hoghouse” is a legislative nickname for an amendment that totally re-writes the bill. A hoghouse amendment deletes all of the language, and replaces it with something new.



Elsa Bisschop testifies against the original version of HB1161

Important Note

In the weeks following its defeat, stakeholders worked with our team to “hoghouse” the bill into a much narrower piece of legislation. The revised version clarified that South Dakota’s privacy protections do not apply in certain limited circumstances involving on-duty firefighters or law enforcement personnel.

For example, if firefighters are using a large shared space, such as a gymnasium, for temporary sleeping quarters during an emergency response, both male and female personnel may be accommodated in the same area.

This hoghoused version of the bill, still titled “HB1161” was passed into law.

HB1184 - An act to define man and woman

This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

This legislation, introduced by Representative Jon Hansen (R-25), established clear definitions of “male” and “female” for use throughout South Dakota law. It could also be described as a “What is a woman?” bill. The definitions are based on biological distinctions and were intended to provide clarity in areas such as

prison policies, birth certificate amendments, and other legal and administrative contexts.

The bill passed the House 57-9 and the Senate 30-4



Speaker Jon Hansen (R-25) and Matt Sharp (Attorney with Alliance Defending Freedom) testify in favor of HB1184

Who are the candidates?

DakotaVoter.com

Research the candidates - Vote your values



Dakota Voter is a pro-family voter guide produced by SD Family Voice Action, and is not created to benefit any specific candidate or political party



Gambling Expansion

SB226 - An act to increase the video lottery machines limit and bet amount

This was a harmful bill that was defeated

This legislation, sponsored by Senator Kyle Schoenfish (R-19), would have increased the number of video lottery machines allowed per establishment from 10 to 15 and raised the maximum bet from \$2 to \$5. It also stipulated that any tax revenue generated above \$175 million would be deposited into a property tax reduction fund.

The bill failed in a Senate committee on a vote of 0-8

HB1158 - An act to establish licensing for online betting pools for horse and dog races

This was a harmful bill that was passed

This legislation, sponsored by Representative Mike Weisgram (R-24), established a process for receiving online bets for horse and dog races in the state.

This is another example of South Dakota stepping toward increased involvement in gambling and a growing reliance on it as a source of revenue. Rather than prioritizing stable and less harmful funding sources, it further ties state interests to the expansion of gambling activity.

The bill passed the House 56-10 and the Senate 29-5

Gambling Expansion

The gaming industry is making a profit in South Dakota - but what is the true cost?

South Dakota is ranked:

- Highest number of casinos per capita (tied with Nevada and Oklahoma)
- Highest number of gaming machines per capita (tied with Nevada, Montana, and Oklahoma)
- Second “most addicted” state (WalletHub, 2025 Report)

Gaming addiction has a severe impact on South Dakota, and we know that on average:

- Addicts have a 15x higher rate of suicide
- Addicts have a 65% divorce rate
- Only 20% can maintain their job and their addiction
- An estimated 68 of the 210 reported embezzlements (2023) were tied to a gambling addiction

SJR504 - A measure to place on the ballot the question of mobile sports betting

This was a harmful bill

that was defeated

This legislation, sponsored by Senator Steve Kolbeck (R-02), would have placed on the ballot the question of mobile sports betting in South Dakota. Currently, sports betting is restricted to casinos in Deadwood and on the reservations.

Mobile sports betting is widely recognized as one of the fastest growing addictions in America, primarily affecting young men aged 18-34. Nearly 20% of mobile sports bettors are categorized as “problem gamblers,” those with some level of addiction.

Proponents of the measure argued that because there are already illegal bets taking place in South Dakota, the state should legalize the industry and place regulations on it - ending the black market and replacing it with a regulated one. The reality in other states however, tells a different story.

We have seen in other states that after legalizing online sports betting, the illegal market has continued to grow, often outpacing expectations. Evidence of this comes from the industry itself, which has acknowledged the persistence and expansion of illegal operators. Four years after nationwide legalization began, the American Gambling Association sent a

letter to Biden-era Attorney General Merrick Garland requesting federal assistance to address the issue. Rather than eliminating the illegal market through regulation, the United States has seen its continued growth.

The letter to AG Garland stated that:

- “a vast illegal sports betting market continues to exist”
- “52% of gamblers continue to utilize illegal bookmakers”
- “Internet searches for illegal betting sites increased by 38% last year, faster than the rate of searches for legal betting sites.”
- “Searches for offshore online gambling brands represented a majority of all sportsbook searches.”

We can also look at the state of Massachusetts as a helpful test-case - the state where DraftKings is headquartered. According to a study commissioned by the Massachusetts Gambling Commission, citizens who use illegal sports books in the state jumped from 4% in 2022 to 18% in 2023, after sports betting was legalized.

The measure passed the Senate 23-10 but failed in a House committee 6-7

“

“The fastest growing addiction that is destroying young men in their 20’s is online sports gambling. They’re screwing an entire generation of young men.”

-Dave Ramsey



SB113 - An act to increase the penalty for prohibiting the practice of religion

This was a good piece of legislation that was passed

This legislation, sponsored by Senator Jim Mehlhaff (R-24), increased the penalty that could be applied to a person who intentionally prevents someone from engaging in their religious practice by

by using threats or acts of violence. As we witnessed the disruption and disregard for a worship service in Minnesota earlier this year, when protesters interrupted a church gathering and violated the sanctity of a place meant for prayer and peace, this bill was clearly needed.

Moving the penalty from a Class 1 Misdemeanor to a Class 6 Felony brings the penalty in line with other similar crimes involving threats and violence.

The bill passed the Senate 30-4 and the House 48-18

HB1216 - An act to add clergy to the list of mandatory reporters

This was a harmful bill that did not pass

This legislation, sponsored by Representative Erin Healy (D-10), would have added clergy to the mandatory reporter list and removed religious privilege from courtroom proceedings.

When analyzing this issue, it is important to understand that South Dakota law already makes it a crime for a person to knowingly conceal a felony (SDCL 22-11-12). In addition, mandatory reporting statutes require certain individuals to report when there is cause to suspect child abuse or neglect (SDCL 26-8A-2).

Because concealing crimes is already

illegal, the key question becomes: when a pastor has cause to suspect a family is struggling, should the response be pastoral care or immediate reporting to the state?

Pastors are uniquely positioned to counsel, support, and guide individuals and families through difficult circumstances. The state should not place clergy in a position where they are required to act primarily as agents of the government rather than as spiritual leaders.

The bill would also have removed religious privilege, requiring that information shared in a confessional setting be admissible in court proceedings. The seal of confession has long been recognized as a protected practice, and compelling disclosure of such communications would represent a significant intrusion into the relationship between clergy and congregants.

The bill failed in committee 4-7

Day at the Capitol

Our Capitol day was another great success! Bringing our friends to Pierre for the day is always a highlight for our team, and we are grateful for the guests who made the trek to spend the day with us, their lawmakers, and coalition leaders.

The day included:

- Exploring the Capitol
- Singing in the rotunda
- Having lunch with elected officials
- Watching committee hearings
- Attending session
- Hearing from pro-family leaders on how we can make an impact
- ...and more!



Mark your
calendars
for next
year, we are
booked for
January 26,
2027!

Scan here to watch the keynote
presentation from Jenna Netherton:
“Standing up for your values”



Day at the Capitol Friends • Ministries • Allies





Grace Sargent

‘How Hard Do We Push?’ *Lessons From My Legislative Internship Journey*

Grace joined the Family Voice team in 2025 for a Communications Internship, then in January of 2026 began an internship for the South Dakota Legislature. After the Legislative Session was over, we were glad to invite Grace back onto our staff team as our Communications Manager!

Getting accepted to the South Dakota Legislative internship for the 2026 session felt like stepping into something I already understood. I arrived with strong opinions, my own expectations, and a fair amount of confidence, but that didn’t last long. At first, I had every reason to feel prepared.

Through past involvement, I had attended committee hearings, testified on bills, built relationships with legislators, and gained what I thought was a solid understanding of how the process worked.

Serving as a legislative page, participating in and staffing TeenPact, shadowing Norman, and leading the SDSU College Republicans all gave me a strong foundation. So I thought I knew what to expect.

I didn’t.

The Capitol is full of people from all walks of life—Republicans, Democrats, Christians, atheists, parents, grandparents, West River, East River, moderates, conservatives—you name it.

We send all these people to Pierre in the hopes that they’ll find common ground, represent us well, and promote positive changes for South Dakotans.

While that sounds good in theory, the reality is far more complicated.

Lessons from the Majority Leader’s Office

Interning for House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach was one of the most impactful parts of my experience. His office was constantly moving, and I watched him navigate challenges within the party with steadiness and resolve. During my time there, I saw conflict up close, hard conversations, difficult votes, pressure from every direction, and the toll leadership positions take on people and their families.

What stood out for me was a deeper realization: we cannot expect a system to consistently produce godly outcomes if the hearts shaping it are not being transformed.

This truth can easily lead to discouragement, but it shouldn’t lead to disengagement.

In fact, it points us to something greater.

People, Not Politics

One of the most important lessons I learned is this: politics is not the starting point of change, people are. Laws reflect hearts, and real, lasting change begins when hearts are transformed by Christ. But that doesn’t mean Christians should step back from the public square. It means we step in with the right perspective.

Throughout the legislative session, I wrestled with a question: “How hard do we push in a world that isn’t meant to last?”

Scripture reminds us that this world is broken and temporary, and that we eagerly await Christ’s return. But that future hope isn’t a reason for inaction, it’s a call to faithful obedience here and now.

Conversations with leaders like Norman, Chaplain Jarvis Wipf, and Speaker Jon Hansen continually brought me back to this truth: yes, the world is broken, but God still calls His people to be present in it.

Lessons From Scripture and History

Jarvis pointed me to the book of Acts, where we see Paul deliberately traveling to major cities, Corinth, Rome, Caesarea, Tarsus. In Acts 1:8, Jesus calls His followers to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, places of cultural and political significance. Paul recognized that one of the most effective ways to impact a nation for Christ was to focus on these hubs, where leaders gathered, commerce flowed, and change happened in real time.

Capital cities matter. Presence matters. Faithful witness matters.

No, our efforts are not in vain. Our hope doesn’t rest in a perfect legislative outcome, it rests in Christ’s finished work on the cross. True

‘How Hard Do We Push?’ Continued...

'How Hard Do We Push?' Continued

transformation begins there, and from that foundation, it can ripple outward into every sphere of life, including government.

Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Even when results aren’t immediate or discouragement looms, we are called to remain faithful.

Stewardship and Responsibility

As Christians, we often talk about stewardship. Throughout Scripture, we see men and women stepping into difficult arenas—not because it was easy or guaranteed success, but because God called them to be faithful with what was placed before them.

The government is no different.

Not everyone is called to run for office. But every believer is called to be a good steward—to pray, speak truth, build relationships, stand for what is right, and be a light in places that desperately need it.

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Proverbs 29:2 says, “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan.” If we long to see righteous leadership, we cannot withdraw from the places where leadership is formed and exercised. There will always be a vacuum.



Grace Sargent on the House floor alongside Major Leader Scott Odenbach during her internship this year.

Instead, we step forward with courage and conviction, recognizing that we are called to defend Truth, pursue justice, and love mercy. God has called us to carry out this responsibility.

Looking Ahead

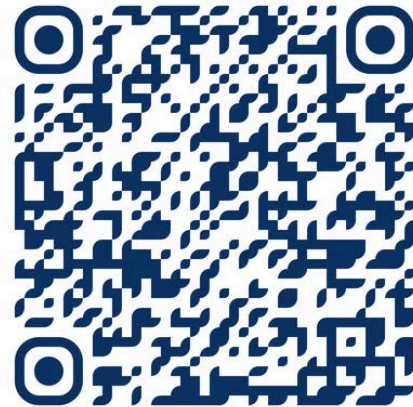
As we wait for Christ’s return, may we take seriously the call of Micah 6:8—to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God—and the charge of Proverbs 31:8-9 to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

During my time in the legislature, witnessing the process up close, building connections, and yes, making an insurmountable amount of coffee, the lessons learned, convictions strengthened, and fire in my belly remain key takeaways I wouldn’t have gained anywhere else. I’m glad to be back with Family Voice and look forward to advancing the Kingdom through advocacy for faith, family, and freedom.

How did your legislators vote?

The Family Voice scorecard gives a snapshot of where South Dakota legislators stand on issues impacting the family. Legislators were scored on 17 different pieces of legislation between the two chambers.

Family Voice Action encourages citizens to study the scorecard and use the information in discussions with their legislators. The elected leaders who stood up for family values deserve our support.



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