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Med school gets \$10M for epigenetic research

By Sydney Mook
Grand Forks Herald

The UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences has been awarded a five-year, \$10 million grant to expand the school's epigenetics research program.

The National Institutes of Health grant, which will be delivered to UND in \$2 million increments, builds on a similar grant the School received in 2013 that was directed toward scholars exploring the epigenetics and epigenomics of disease, the school reported in a press release.

Researchers studying epigenetics explore the mechanisms that regulate gene expression and the activation and deactivation of specific genes. Understanding better how the human body can turn genes on and off during growth and aging and in response to its environment has important implications for the diagnosis and treatment of cancer, neurodegenerative diseases, such as

MED SCHOOL: Page A5

Settlement talks slated in EGF lawsuit

By Joe Bowen
Grand Forks Herald

East Grand Forks and a woman who's suing the city are scheduled to consider a settlement in November.

Jodie Hasbrouck-Wagner sued the city last fall, claiming that it violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Minnesota Human Rights Act when it rescinded a conditional job offer in November 2016 after learning of her diagnosed depression. Magistrate Judge Leo Brisbois ordered Hasbrouck-Wagner's and the city's lawyers to meet on Nov. 7 in Fergus Falls for a settlement conference and "engage in a full and frank discussion of settlement" at least 10 days before then.

Hasbrouck-Wagner worked for East Grand Forks City Attorney Ron Galstad at an area law firm and alleges he fired her in 2006 because of her "frequent absences," which were "caused by Wagner's depression and anxiety, of which Galstad knew." Hasbrouck-Wagner attempted suicide hours later and was hospitalized, her complaint against the city claims.

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Photo by Will Kincaid / Special to NDNA

A prisoner from Missouri River Correctional Center sits before the North Dakota Parole Board at a January meeting. At right is North Dakota Parole Board member Jackson Lofgren.

Calculated risks

How corrections officials manage North Dakota's criminals

OUTSIDE CHANCES
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By Sam Easter
North Dakota
Newspaper Association
Bismarck
The Parole Board's January meeting is in a second-floor conference room with fresh carpet and dark wood in the North Dakota State Penitentiary — up the stairs and down a side hallway from double metal doors and tight security.
There's a chair where a prisoner sits and faces the three-person panel. There are tears at times, like when a woman recounts with extreme emotion a car accident with a motorcyclist during the throes of addiction. There's a conrte recollection of a man beating a child. There's a sharply dressed man who promises

his life is turned around, that the drunken crash that killed three has led him to a career in addiction counseling.
Behind the board members is a large wall clock, ticking away the time — their wards' most precious resource.
It's a parade of regret, one that has been happening for decade upon decade, in which the state government decides whether prisoners are ready for the responsibility of serving the rest of their sentence — while supervised — in the community. But, in North Dakota, the years have brought changes. In 2005, the average number of parole days granted by the board was 227 per prisoner, according to state records. In 2018, it was 357 — a 57% increase. Between 2015

and 2018, it grew more than 15%.
Increasingly, North Dakota's prisoners are going free earlier in their sentences — part of a seismic change in American criminal justice that, over the past 20 years, has transformed the way the public thinks and talks about crime.
That change has been especially apparent in North Dakota, where a debate is roiling over what's best for communities. Burgeoning state prisons and fresh thinking on crime and punishment mean North Dakota's leaders are improving prison conditions, reducing the punishment for some low-level crimes and investing more in programs that target drug rehabilitation
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EDITOR'S NOTE

This series, sponsored by the North Dakota Newspaper Association and the Grand Forks Herald, aims to answer questions at the difficult intersection between budget crunches, criminal justice and the well-being of North Dakota's communities. As rising prison populations stress the state's corrections system, how will state leaders address what some say is a risk to public safety?
► **Today:** How corrections officials manage North Dakota's criminals
► **Sunday:** The political sea changes that built North Dakota's prisons
► **Monday:** North Dakota's other housing problem
► **Tuesday:** Is North Dakota's criminal safety net too thin?
► **Wednesday:** How will North Dakota balance budgets and criminal justice?

Hundreds graduate from UND



Photo by Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Susan Rae Walton is hooded by School of Graduate Studies Associate Dean Chris Nelson and her daughter, Kelly Walton Barringer, after receiving her doctorate of philosophy on Friday, Aug. 2.

By Sydney Mook
Grand Forks Herald

The sounds of "Pomp and Circumstance" filled the halls of the Chester Fritz Auditorium as hundreds of UND students officially became alumni on Friday, Aug. 3.
More than 500 students were eligible to receive degrees at UND's summer commencement ceremony. This marks the sixth year with more than 500 summer graduates, with 529 eligible students, according to a UND press release. There were 235 undergraduate students, 239 graduate students, and two law students who graduated on Friday.
Phil Wisecup, vice

chancellor of the North Dakota University System, officiated the ceremony. UND interim President Joshua Wynne had a scheduling conflict and did not attend the ceremony.
State Board of Higher Education member Jill Louters spoke during the ceremony.
Graduate Matthew Knutson, who said he enjoyed his time at UND, majored in accountancy. "It was fun," he said. "Got to make a lot of friends in the program and got to develop relationships through those four years. I started taking some freshman accounting classes and

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CORRECTIONS

From Page A1

and better mental health. Leaders with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation insist that offenders will — for the most part — someday be your neighbor. In what kind of shape do you want them to return to your community?

“Folks that have served long sentences with us, say, 15, 20 years, 25 years — even eight years — (it) gets to be a long time where you’re not in society. They become institutionalized,” said Leann Bertsch, director of the DOCR. If they’re locked up long enough, they may not recognize a cellphone when they come out, or a debit card or a Walmart. “They don’t know how to even have a conversation and look someone in the eye. And so, how do you expect them to go get a job when they can’t carry on a normal conversation because they’ve been institutionalized?”

But some critics are worried about the pressure reforms place on a strained criminal justice system. The plan to rehabilitate prisoners — and not simply lock them up — depends on a strong rehabilitation system. But what if it’s not there yet?

“Our local parole and probation officers are working with extremely high caseloads,” Grand Forks County State’s Attorney Haley Wamstad said. “They’re spread very thin in monitoring these people that are in our community that should be on supervision.”

Stutsman County State’s Attorney Fritz Fremgen answered his phone in early December as he was in the midst of charging a prior offender — this one with a previous misdemeanor meth conviction.

“Now the police caught him, again, allegedly burglarizing somebody’s house. Now we’ll charge him, again, with a burglary,” Fremgen said. “There are not enough treatment resources. There are not enough prison beds. There are not enough people in the system to address the methamphetamine addiction. It’s creating more thefts and problems in the community.”

More than lockup

There’s a prisoner appearing before the Parole Board via teleconference now, a young man in his 20s. His image is cast on screen; he’s in a white T-shirt and beige prison trousers. As the board weighs his case, they mute their microphones and a case manager on his end mutes his. The prisoner sits in silence — still visible but unable to hear as the three-person board weighs his future.

“I think his situation reflects the problem with mandatory minimum sentences,” says board member Jackson Lofgren, lamenting the state’s decision to greatly lengthen his sentence over prior drug charges. “This is somebody who probably would have been OK on probation ... if it wasn’t for parole, he’d be here until 2030.”

The board deliberates



Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald
Leann Bertsch, director of the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, discusses the mission of the DOCR in Bismarck.

for a few moments, then the microphones are back on. They tell him when he’ll be out: Sept. 24, 2019, a decade earlier than the end of his sentence. It’s an early January meeting; that means that, suddenly, he has less than nine months left in a cell. He has a new life. He offers his thanks before the video cuts out.

Lofgren, speaking after the January Parole Board meeting, said North Dakota is beginning to recognize there’s more to rehabilitation than lockup.

“There are some legal changes behind it that do have an impact on (those parole time figures),” Lofgren said in a phone interview. “Also behind that is the realization, especially in the last five, six, seven years, that we need to have services available in the community, and that includes mental health services, addiction services, counseling services. And if we don’t do that, it’s really hard to have a viable rehabilitation system.”

Lofgren’s comments emblemize change in the American criminal justice reform — where North Dakota is leading the way. The state has been featured in national media outlets, from National Public Radio to Governing Magazine for its “Norway experiment” — an emulation of the Scandinavian country’s progressive prison system that emphasizes rehabilitation. Mother Jones reports North Dakotan prison officials at Missouri River Correctional Center, a minimum-security facility near Bismarck, caught on quickly, “devising ways for inmates to earn more freedom — shopping excursions, day passes home, and even the right to wear civilian clothes on-site.”

And multiple sources, from Lofgren to Gov. Doug Burgum, point out that significant numbers of North Dakota prisoners have issues with drugs or alcohol or mental health.

“The governor had the concept ... that if we can get these people invested in some type of programming to address their addiction needs, that, for those people, treatment should be more of a focus than long-term

incarceration,” Lofgren said. “I think the attitude of most of the members of the parole board would be that. I can’t speak for all the members of the parole board, but for myself.”

Swelling numbers

Some changes, like the ones described by Mother Jones, manage prisoners’ experience during incarceration. But others manage the duration and the nature of punishment, and those changes in philosophy come in the face of more than a mere change of heart. The state’s prison population is swelling quickly. The DOCR’s average daily inmate count was at 1,336 in 2005, and grew to 1,761 in 2018, an increase of 31.8%. In the same time frame, the state’s population has only grown about 18% — indicating highly disproportionate growth in the prison system.

That amounts to a budgetary problem. As a corrections spokesperson pointed out, the cost of housing a prisoner is more than 25 times more expensive per day than paroling them, and state officials made concerns about costs a central argument in a 2017 set of changes that promoted the use of probation — when an offender is immediately sentenced to supervised living in the community — among other reforms.

But along with that comes concerns for the community and for offenders’ futures. State’s attorneys around North Dakota say caseloads for parole and probation officers appear extremely high — and some are even worried that endangers public safety. According to the American Probation and Parole Association, standards for parole and probation officers’ caseloads is as low as 20 for high-risk offenders, though low-risk offender caseloads can be as high as 100. State records show caseloads in some parts of North Dakota have soared past 100 in the past decade. The state says these high figures include many low-risk, low-maintenance offenders.

North Dakota’s corrections officials did not grant a request to speak directly with local parole and probation

officers. Bertsch said she does not want those officers distracted from their work, even if only for 10 minutes. And though Bertsch suggested the possibility of a ride-along, a spokesperson for the DOCR later said in May that the option had been considered and rejected — at least for the next six months — and would not clarify the reason why, despite repeated questioning.

Risks and resources

Asked about risks to communities that might stem from overloaded parole and probation officers, Bertsch points out that granting supervised release is a decision made outside of her department. Probation is granted by judges, and parole by the state Parole Board — and then she invokes an exploration of what “risk” really means. She points out that prisoners who are locked down almost all the time aren’t much of a risk to the state while they’re in prison, but they probably fare much worse in the community after they are released.

If she ran a hypothetical, harsh prison, she wouldn’t take much risk in the short term — “but I just transferred all of that risk to the community by doing absolutely nothing to try to reduce (it),” she said.

As a judge — or as a state’s attorney, Bertsch argued — it’s tempting to give or argue for a harsher sentence. A judge’s conscience stays clean in the knowledge that criminals aren’t out on probation; a prosecutor’s reelection is probably easier if they can claim they’re tough on crime.

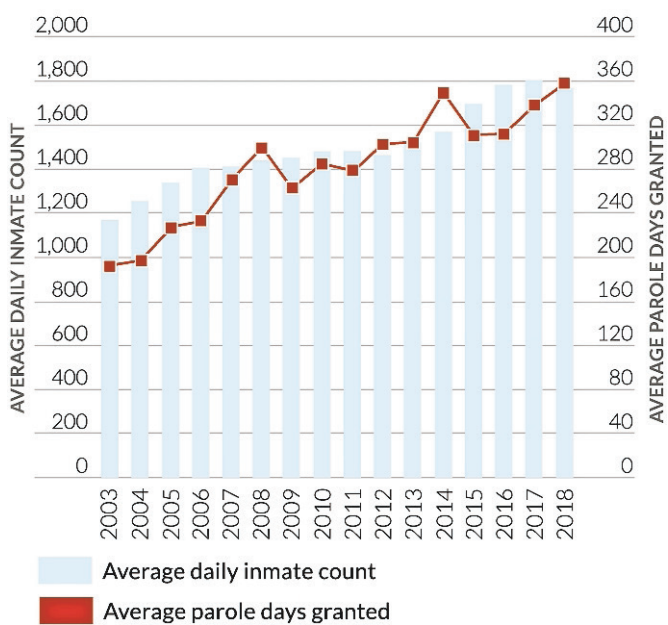
“But that doesn’t necessarily get you where you want in the long term,” she said. “Because a longer sentence doesn’t necessarily make that person safer in the end.”

And many strong critics frame their concerns less as a worry about the goals and more as a matter of necessary resources. Wamstad says that North Dakota’s new schematic — less emphasis on lockup, more on rehabilitation — could use more support.

“These people are in our community, and we need to have the

More prisoners, more parolees

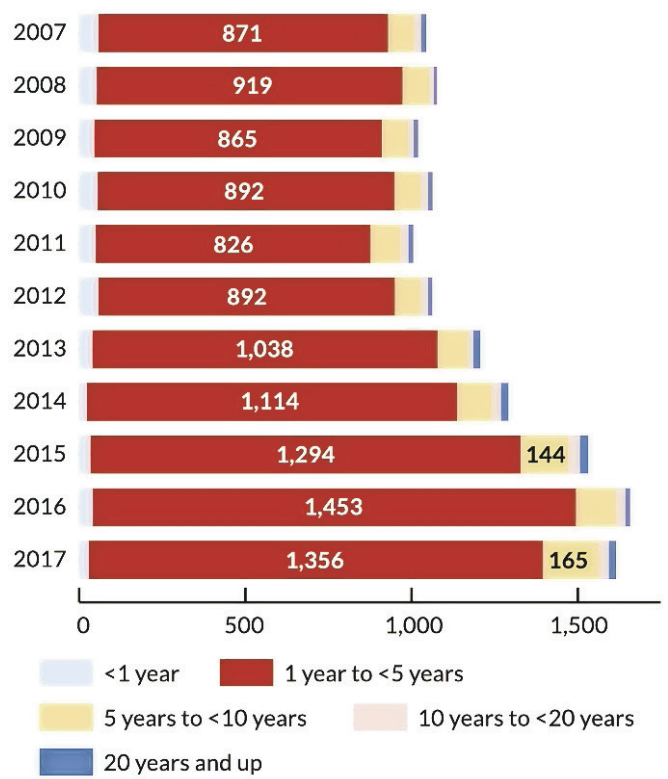
As North Dakota’s prison population has grown, the state has adopted a more forward-looking philosophy on parole, releasing prisoners earlier in their sentence and focusing more on rehabilitating future “neighbors.”



Source: North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
North Dakota Newspaper Association

Doing time in North Dakota

The surge in North Dakota’s prisoners is mostly occurring for offenders sentenced to between one and five years in prison — the group shown in red below.



Note: All years are fiscal years. Chart shows annual admissions.
Source: North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation
North Dakota Newspaper Association

resources locally to be able to treat these underlying issues, whether it be chemical dependency or mental health so that they’re not committing new offenses in our community and being a safety risk,” she says.

Recidivism rates show how often offenders either get new convictions or incur “technical” violations of supervised release — which sends them back to incarceration. In North Dakota, it’s been changing for years.

For those released in 2000, about 25% had a new conviction within three years. That rate fell to about 17% for those released in 2014.

Technical recidivism, though, has been on the rise, increasing from about 11% for the 2000 release year and increasing to 28.3% by the 2014 release year.

As a result, the combined rate has increased from 36% to about 45.7% during the same time period.

Again and again, sources interviewed for this series stressed that problems in North Dakota’s criminal justice system aren’t simple — they’re systemic. Available prison beds, parole and probation officers’ caseloads, recidivism rates and the

like all depend on things like the opioid crisis, the state’s number of addiction counselors or the amount of resources the Legislature diverts to resources such as drug rehab. Problems depend on crime rates in western North Dakota’s Oil Patch; on criminal justice law; on what state leaders plan to do next.

State Rep. Rick Holman, D-Mayville, said he suspects the reconviction rate is falling as North Dakota grapples with a new approach to criminal justice that’s focused on rehabilitating prisoners.

“I like what’s going on. I like the direction we’re going,” he said. “But we’re still in that, for lack of a better term, that discussion about — should we punish, or should we rehabilitate? And we’re still caught in that, in North Dakota.”

Asked what the DOCR would do with more funding, Bertsch said she’d spend it on programming, such as vocational training for people in prisons. And, she said, she’d spend it on more probation and parole officers to bring down rising caseloads.

“I think we’ve done a really great job with the resources we have,” she said. “But we make do with the resources we have.”

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