

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 1090

Feisal Hagi

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you today to address an issue that, while often overlooked, continues to pose a serious threat to the safety and well-being of individuals, particularly young people, in various social environments: hazing.

House Bill 1090 is too important not to pass.

We've seen it in the last couple years from 7th graders in Codington County to Davison County with highschoolers, and now my story at South Dakota State University.

Hazing, though sometimes perceived as a rite of passage or a tradition, is a dangerous practice that can have lasting physical, emotional, and psychological effects on its victims. It involves subjecting individuals—often newcomers to a group or organization—to humiliating, degrading, and sometimes physically harmful activities. The consequences of hazing are far-reaching. In some cases, it can result in injury, trauma, and even death. Beyond the immediate harm, hazing often leaves lasting scars that impact one's mental health, relationships, and overall sense of self-worth.

Hazing also fosters an environment of toxic conformity, where individuals feel pressured to comply with harmful behaviors in order to gain acceptance or avoid retaliation. This creates an atmosphere where people are less likely to speak out against abuse or seek help, out of fear of becoming a target themselves.

This is why hazing laws are critical. Such laws serve as a necessary deterrent against harmful practices, ensuring that individuals and organizations understand the legal and ethical implications of hazing. By enforcing clear guidelines and consequences, these laws help to protect individuals from being subjected to life-altering abuse. Hazing laws send a strong message that harmful behavior will not be tolerated, and that accountability must be upheld. They also provide a legal framework for victims to seek justice and hold perpetrators and institutions responsible for their actions.

In addition to safeguarding individuals, hazing laws encourage the cultivation of a healthier, more inclusive culture within organizations and communities. When hazing is prohibited and eliminated, it opens the door for meaningful relationships to form relationships built on respect, trust, and shared experiences rather than fear and humiliation.

Speaking from personal experience:

To share my personal experience with hazing at South Dakota State University, and to emphasize why stronger hazing laws are desperately needed. My experience and the university's failure to act has only reinforced how critical it is for us to protect students from such harmful practices.

During my time at South Dakota State University, I was subjected to hazing rituals that were not only traumatic, but also incredibly dangerous. This hazing wasn't just done by students—it also involved university staff, people who get paid with tax dollars (who still are employed by SDSU somehow). Some of the activities included blindfolding, being forced to participate in an "elephant walk," being locked in closets, doing a naked lap around the block, and, in one of the most disturbing instances, minors were forced to drink a gallon of alcohol in one sitting. We were made to stay awake for 24 hours, students were chained up, and were required to take a fraternity exam that included explicit and graphic sexual questions.

What made it even worse was that I like many others had no idea what was going to happen until it was too late. After the hazing was over, we were threatened with severe consequences if we shared what had happened. We were forced into secrecy, manipulated into thinking there would be retaliation if we spoke up.

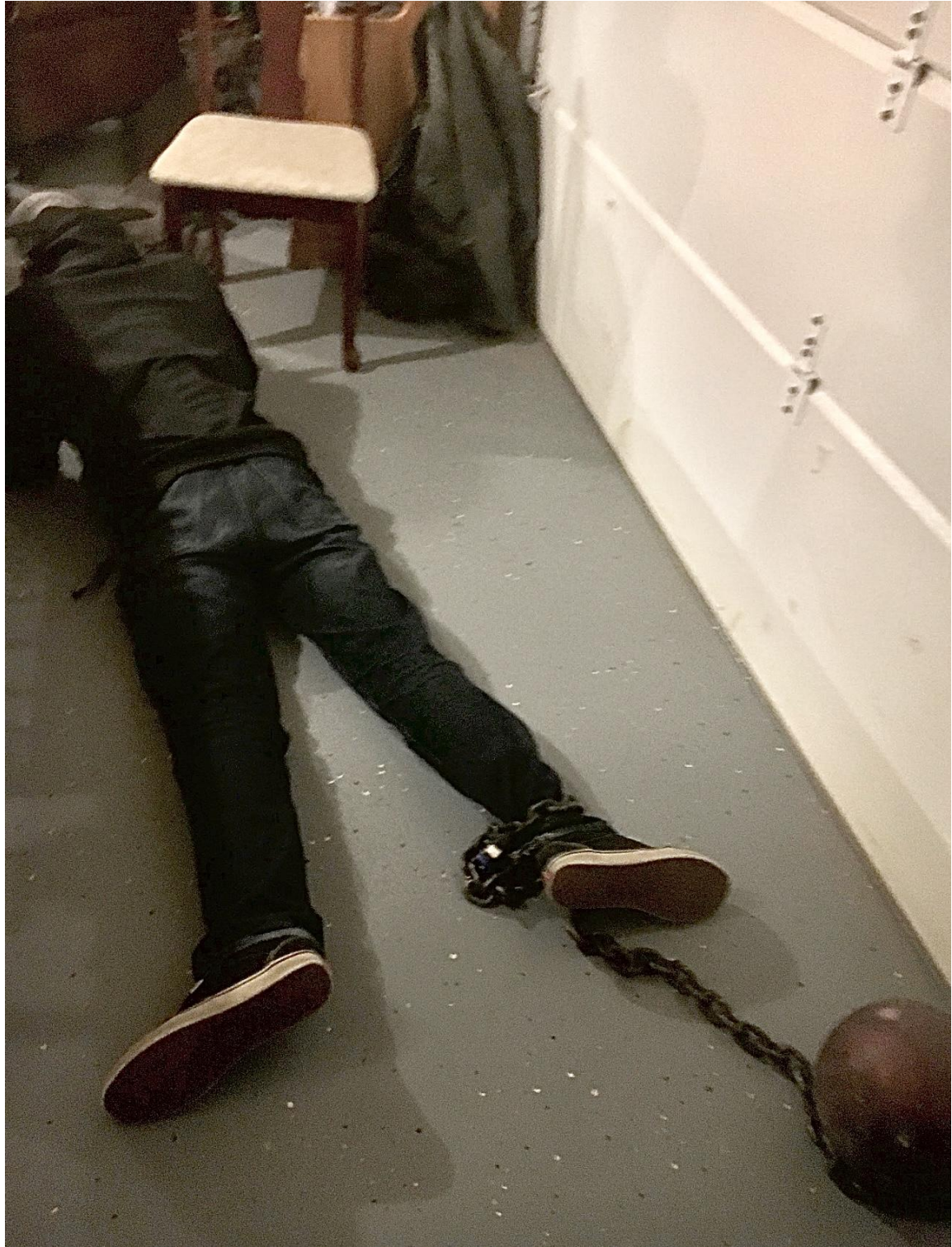
I reported these incidents to multiple university staff members, including University President Barry Dunn. Despite my efforts, nothing was done, and nothing still has been done to this day. It seemed clear that the university cared more about protecting its image than ensuring the safety and well-being of its students. As a result of their inaction, South Dakota State University is now under federal investigation for its failure to protect students. But by that point, the damage had already been done.

I also reported the hazing to law enforcement, and my case was escalated to the Division of Criminal Investigations (DCI). However, because there was no specific hazing law in place at the time, they were unable to take any action. This situation exposed a major gap in the law one that allows this kind of abuse to go unpunished and leaves victims with no legal recourse.

Hazing is not some harmless tradition or rite of passage it is a dangerous practice that can have lasting physical, emotional, and psychological effects. It's crucial that we recognize the severity of hazing and the long-term harm it causes to its victims. Stronger hazing laws are essential to ensure that these practices are not tolerated and that there are consequences for those responsible. These laws not only protect students, but they also promote accountability and ensure that institutions are held responsible for safeguarding their students.

In closing, the failure of South Dakota State University to take action and protect students from hazing only underscores the need for stronger laws and policies. We need to create an environment where students can feel safe, supported, and free from the fear of abuse. Strong hazing laws are the first step toward making that a reality.

Please review the attached photos. I can provide videos upon request.











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