

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Human Services Committee

January 20, 2021

By: Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

RE: Senate Bill 2083 – Child Abuse and Neglect Changes

Chairman Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I am the Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director, serving the service area of Traill and Steele Counties, a member of the North Dakota Social Service Director Association, and a member of the North Dakota Association of Counties Board of Directors. Please consider my testimony in support of SB 2083.

North Dakota has been engaged various redesign efforts over the past three years. One of the key areas of redesign includes our child welfare system, including child protective services. It is through those efforts, our system has been examined, areas for improvement identified, and change implemented. The process of redesign allows us to take a birds-eye view of our programs examining how services can be better provided to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and quality.

One example that has resulted from redesign effort is the implementation of the Safety Practice Model. This practice model structures the array of child welfare services - child protection, foster care and in-home services, use similar terminology, definition, and vision. It aligns the various levels of intervention in a way that is mindful of the values and goals of the entire system. Necessary changes have been identified. Some changes can be addressed through policy and practice. Other changes are required in law. These changes are included in Senate Bill 2083.

From the local boots on the ground standpoint, these changes are necessary. The change from a “*services required*” system to a “*confirmed*” determination yields a much more accurate representation. The term “*services required*” or “*no services required*” was often confusing to families and partners in the child welfare system. The proposed term change to “*confirmed*” or “*not confirmed*” does not change the intervention, but rather it communicates a clearer outcome message. Our goal remains to protect children and empower families. If there are risks to the family and child, our goal is to offer services and strategies to help mitigate safety risk and to strengthen families. Engagement is key to any type of intervention or change. Clearer definitions and language are key important for building an environment for engagement and support.

In addition, I am supportive of the changes proposed to institutional child abuse and neglect systems. There are opportunities for greater accountability and protective measures that can be supported under the institutional child abuse and neglect model. SB 2083 provides for the assessment to be completed by a DHS field specialist, who are members of a state specialty team. Under current law and practice, human service zones assess child protection reports related to schools and the reports related to a department funded facilities are completed by DHS. HB 2083 calls for all types of *institutional* (including school-based) child abuse and neglect reports to be assessed by the DHS specialty team and if warranted, a law enforcement investigation. Also, employers of such institutions have opportunity to take employer-related actions towards personnel who may have adversely impacted a child’s safety and those institutions would be held accountable for keeping children safe. This proposed change is highly supported and one that county social service directors (now human service zone directors) have advocated for many years.

The proposed change to remove reference of child protection team members is also supported. It removes outdated language and modernizes the law to support redesign system

changes. While we are grateful for the role that child protection teams have held in the past, our redesigned system no longer utilizes this process as it was a barrier to timely determination and notification to the family and if applicable, juvenile court.

This concludes my testimony on SB 2083. I stand for questions from the committee.