

January 25, 2023

House Human Services Committee

Chair Representative Weisz

Chair Weisz, members of the committee, good morning, my name is Carl Young. I am the Executive Director of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum (FASD) – North Dakota. Formerly known as Family Services Network, Inc. We are a non-profit dedicated to supporting those who are born substance exposed to drugs and alcohol, as well as their families. Those affected by drugs and alcohol in the womb didn't ask for their prognosis. Most are diagnosed with multiple mental health issues prior to getting a diagnosis of FASD.

I am also a parent of a young adult who was diagnosed from the age of three with several mental health issues. In fact, from the age of five, he was on adult doses of most of his medications.

Today, I am here to give you an example of some of the things our family struggled with.

**Acceptance.** Not just in our home that one of our kids had severe mental illness, but in our community. Our schools. And sometimes, in the professional community that was supposed to be helping treat him.

**Preservation.** We adopted our son when he was two years old. In our case, it was a foster-care to adopt situation. While we knew that he had been born substance exposed, we didn't know about the alcohol which is far more damaging to the developing embryo than any drug. We didn't expect the child we love to stay awake for 72 hours at a time. We didn't expect the level of violence and other issues that came from the mental illness. When we sought help, we had to go through the a labyrinth of channels to get the support he needed, and even then it was mixed, spotty and often ineffective.

**Family Support.** Many of the members of our family outside of our household didn't understand what our family was going through. They thought that we should just give him back to the state of North Dakota. How do you give back your child? When the time came for us to seek treatment in one of our states Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities we adamantly refused to give up custody. What would giving up custody of our son tell him?

**Stigma.** Let me tell you about stigma, it's something I face daily in my work. People with severe mental illness have symptoms. Symptoms can include a lot of things that appear to be behaviors. Most often these symptoms are a response to external stimulation of an underlying condition and an unconscious response to that stimulation. I am not a psychologist, a doctor or anything like that. What I am is a parent with lived experience. A peer support person.

Our son was on adult doses of most of his psychotropic medications when he was five years old. Because of the way his body metabolizes medication, we had to frequently change his medication. We sought care across two states for him. Because of the process involved in getting care, one agency "cured" him 4 times.

I speak of stigma. The stigma of knowing your child, in a moment of intense psychological pain, wants and is seeking to kill you. And as a father, knowing that no matter how much you desire to repair him, there is little that you can do. So you sacrifice your own health, your own mental well-being for theirs. I speak of the shame of bearing that stigma as a family. Knowing that people in your community are

talking about your family behind your back. About the bizarre way your child acts, the frequent calls to 911. The investigations by Children and Family Services.

So, I am here in support of HB1468. Mental Health Awareness will go a long way toward helping the community of families be able to cope with life by generating awareness of how significant mental health is in our world.

I leave you with this thought.

The city of Mandan has roughly 25000 people in the main part of the city. At least according to population reports. That's roughly the number of people in our state who are diagnosed with mental illness of any kind.

How many are undiagnosed in part because of the stigma attached to mental illness?

What illness carries the same stigma as mental illness?