

Senate Bill 2002
House Appropriations Committee
Education and Environment Division
Testimony Presented by Barbara Andrist

Chairman Nathe and members of the committee. My name is Barbara Andrist. I live in Bismarck and I'm here today to support expanding the lay guardian ad litem program as outlined by Ms. Holewa to \$935,768 so monitoring of the foster care children can be accomplished.

I am a former foster parent, and in a 40-year public health nursing career in Minnesota and North Dakota I spent many years working on child protection teams.

According to Youthworks, this last year had 1883 children in foster care in North Dakota, with just four full-time and 15 part-time staff in the lay guardian ad litem program to serve them. I encourage you to support the additional appropriation to add four more FTEs to this program. Here's why. Our family is intimately aware of what happens when there is not sufficient funding to provide guardian ad litem advocates for children who have been removed from their family homes.

In our system, lay guardian ad litem advocates only for foster children until the courts have ordered placement outside the home. After that, apparently because of "limited budget" resources since 2017, the guardian ad litem is dismissed and the child no longer has an advocate in the system. As the next court hearing approaches the guardian ad litem is reinstated. Social Services continue to advocate for family reunification, but there is no one left to advocate for the health and safety of the child. The Court Improvement Program finished their guardian ad litem assessment in July of 2024 and has asked for this funding amount, \$935,768. We need and can do better than the \$470,000 appropriated by the Senate. I am hopeful that additional funding and FTEs in the guardian ad litem program will be the first step in protecting children in foster care the way they need to be protected with the monitoring throughout their placement.

These children need the advocates to continue working on their behalf throughout the entire foster care placement, not just at the beginning. For privacy reasons I can't give you specific details about the situation that right now is important to our family. But I can tell you we worry every day that at least one child in this system is destined to be returned to the same living conditions that originally resulted in foster care placement.

Your approval of four new positions will go a long way toward providing these vulnerable children with the services they need and deserve.

Thank you for your consideration.