



Testimony Prepared for the House Judiciary Committee

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SB 2352 – Related to the authorization for children of inmates to reside at Heart River Correctional Center

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Chair Klemin, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, my name is Dennis Meier. I am the Director for the Three Rivers Human Service Zone, which includes the counties of Morton, Sioux, and Grant. In addition, I am a member of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. I am here today to provide testimony in support of SB 2352 relating to the authorization for children of inmates to reside at the Heart River Correctional Center.

Human Service Zones are mandated to provide child welfare services, including child protection, foster care, in-home case management, and referral intakes for the Child in Need of Services program (or CHINS). Zones also administer economic assistance programs for the state of North Dakota. It is through these duties that we interact with residents of correctional facilities and their children. For example, we partner with the Department of Corrections to support outreach efforts that help returning citizens successfully transition back into their communities. These efforts include zone support with applications for economic assistance, which helps prevent gaps in medical coverage. Often, zones serve as the legal custodian for children with incarcerated parents.

Senate Bill 2352 provides an opportunity for residents to care for their children in a supportive environment while strengthening parenting competencies. By developing policies that support child safety, and by planning for collaboration between inmates and service providers, facility personnel, and other stakeholders, SB 2352 also supports the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR) in its efforts to take a restorative approach to criminal justice.

Through conversation with DOCR and Heart River Correctional Center (HRCC) personnel, my understanding is that the intention of this bill is to allow a child to reside with their mother until she is discharged from the facility, if the child is eighteen months of age or younger. A resident who wishes to participate in this opportunity will be selected by an agency committee through an application process. This process would ensure that selected residents are experiencing good mental and behavioral health. These steps would help ensure that a participating resident can provide safe caregiving and positive engagement for her child.

The North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association is in support of the fundamental aspects of this proposed bill. However, we would look for ongoing collaboration between North Dakota Health and Human Services, DOCR, and HRCC regarding the development and review of policy and procedures relating to this matter.

As the director of an agency that administers child protection services to include assessing reported allegations of abuse or neglect, it is crucial that before this program is launched, HRCC has established clear policies, procedures, and training requirements to ensure child safety. We encourage all necessary checks of registries relating to offenses against children, both for HRCC employees and for any residents tasked with a caregiving role or responsibility. Likewise, we advocate for all employees and caregiving residents to meet training requirements on safe sleeping, pediatric CPR, and mandated reporting of abuse and neglect.

As the director of an agency that is dedicated to child safety and family preservation, I firmly believe that SB 2352 is an incredible opportunity to build a strong, enduring relationship between child and parent, and that this will decrease the likelihood of future involvement in the child welfare system.

In conclusion, our association looks forward to the opportunity for collaboration regarding policy development, review, and implementation of this program. Thank you for your consideration.