

03/04/2025

HB 1268

Dear Chairman Senator Lee and Senate Human Service Committee Members.

My name is Madisyn Zahradka-Peterson, and I express my support for all individuals advocating for House Bill 1268. I am 28 years of age and serve as a School-Based Case Worker. I possess a bachelor's degree in social work. In addition to my professional responsibilities, I am a single mother of two biological children and have adopted my third child through the foster care system. Over the course of three years, I have served as a foster mother to numerous children, and I currently have five children in my care, whose ages range from 3 to 16 years of age.

I would like to take this opportunity to share my belief that HB 1268 is an essential addition to the North Dakota Century Code. I can speak on behalf of my professional role working for a foster care agency through their school-based case worker position, where I have advocated for family reunification. Additionally, as an active foster care parent, I have witnessed firsthand the negative impact that failed family reunification can have on children due to continued drug use and lack of drug testing and follow-up after reunification is granted.

My now 14-year-old adopted daughter, Hannah, shared how prior to living with me that in approximately 12 years of her life, she had lived in ten different foster placements. When she was younger, she was placed with an aunt who was stable and giving her proper routine, ensuring she made it to school, and meeting her other basic needs. However, due to reunification attempts when her mother allegedly became sober, Hannah was removed from a stable, loving home to reunify with her mother. Sadly, very shortly after the reunification with her mother, her mother relapsed, and Hannah was forced to live in a homeless shelter with her before bouncing around to several other foster placements prior to being placed in my care.

I have witnessed firsthand from my experiences with my daughter and other foster children in my care that the trauma endured by children in the foster care system can have long-lasting effects on their lives and create skewed perspectives of life itself. While the foster care system aims to bring thoughts of hope and joy to children through its mission of family reunification, it raises serious concerns when children are returned to environments from which they were originally removed due to the safety and well-being of the child or children within the care of their parent or parents.

It is crucial that safety planning involves drug testing before reunification or visitations, as well as after reunification has occurred. If our primary mission is family reunification, then we should mandate

the implementation of HB 1268 in the reunification process. Failing to do so would be a significant disservice—not only to the social workers and foster parents who dedicate themselves to working with these children, helping them address their trauma, and connecting them to community supports deemed necessary but most importantly, the children themselves.

It is imperative that we implement HB1268 before any unsupervised visits occur to ensure the safety and well-being of these vulnerable children placed within our foster care system. Enough is enough when you live the reality of not only being a social worker but also as an adoptive and foster mother personally enduring all the effects of the trauma left on a child after being placed in your care and made your responsibility.

HB 1268 would not only support peace of mind to all the foster parents, but it would afford us the reassurance that family reunification is something we can believe in wholeheartedly if proper safety planning and mandatory drug testing is made a requirement by law.

Thank you for your time,

Madisyn Zahradka-Peterson