

HOUSE HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
HB 1567
TESTIMONY OF DORI LESLIE, CHI FRIENDSHIP (NDACP MEMBER)
JANUARY 26, 2025

Good morning members of the Human Resources committee. I am Dori Leslie, Executive Director of CHI Friendship, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on additional resources needed for dental and oral health care services for low-income, Native American children and individuals with disabilities in North Dakota. CHI Friendship has been providing services to people with disabilities in the Fargo and Grafton/Park River areas since 1974. Today we serve over 200 clients and have about 350 staff. Our major areas of service to people with developmental disabilities are in group homes, apartments, and in vocational/employment settings.

As a state, North Dakota can and should take great pride in the outstanding services it has provided over the years to people with disabilities. Among the reasons North Dakota has been recognized as such a strong leader in this field is because of the outstanding leadership from the Department of Human Services, the quality of care from providers, and the important ongoing support of our state legislators. Thank you.

I stand before you today to passionately advocate for significant improvements to dental care access and quality, particularly for underserved communities. As a leader in the Developmental Disability field for close to 35 years, I have witnessed firsthand the devastating consequences of inadequate dental care, impacting not only oral health but overall well-being and systemic health.

According to insurekidsnow.gov there are six dental providers within a 50 mile radius of Fargo that are currently approved to accept ND Medicaid and who are able to support patients with "special healthcare needs". Due to the limited number of dental providers in our area, NDMA recipients have had to seek services over 250 miles away and sometimes out of state. Goebel Pediatric Dentistry is the only dental provider in the entire state of North Dakota that offers dental services under general anesthesia, they are located in Bismarck.

At CHI Friendship, there are currently 38 individuals that travel to Bismarck for their routine dental care or require the use of general anesthesia to complete a thorough dental exam, cleaning or restoration service. Goebel Pediatric Dentistry schedules one to two days each month that they identify as "special needs days". These days are reserved for North Dakota Medicaid recipients. They have two doctors and 12 staff on shift and see on average, 120 patients each day. Unfortunately, they only expect about half of each visit to be paid for by insurance.

Dental providers in the Fargo/Moorhead area have shared that they have to limit the number of patients insured by North Dakota Medicaid due to inadequate reimbursement for time, services rendered and delayed payment on submitted claims. Several dental offices report that they end up having to write off many NDMA claims, due to denial of coverage, lengthy prior authorizations, or claims being consistently denied. Each of these cases result in zero payment to a dental office, they are essentially donating their time and services.

In October of 2022, one of the Minnesota dental providers decided to no longer accept NDMA due to the previously mentioned concerns. According to AppleTree Dental, this left over 1,000 patients (children and adults) seeking a new dental provider that would accept North Dakota Medicaid insurance. AppleTree Dental provided a compassionate and gentle approach in the care they provided. They took time to get to know each patient. Patients were encouraged to go to the office without appointments to become familiar with the location (exposure therapy) and if anxiety was a concern, patients were able to schedule multiple appointments to complete their dental work in small steps. In speaking with a representative at AppleTree, they shared that NDMA would not reimburse claims due to the title variations of their assistant/hygienist in the notes that were submitted for payment.

There continues to be a significant shortage of dental providers willing to accept North Dakota Medicaid. Oral health and hygiene affects the entire body; weight, diet, airway, energy, cardiovascular and metabolic disorders, etc. In order to continue supporting people to have their best possible health, we ask for your support by completing a Legislative Management Study regarding access to improved dental and oral care for low-income, Native American children and individuals with disabilities in North Dakota.

Thank you!