



Testimony Prepared for the Senate Judiciary Committee
HB 1549 — Relating to the Correctional Facility Grant Program
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March 19, 2025

Chair Larson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Dennis Meier. I serve as the Director of 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 testify in support of House Bill 1549.

Human service zones are the legal designee of the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS). A core responsibility of human service zones is to help North Dakotans determine their eligibility for state- and federally funded economic assistance programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). These programs are tools that help improve access to basic needs, enhance the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, and promote financial stability for those who are experiencing economic hardship.

Beyond traditional economic assistance, zones support individuals with self-sufficiency goals through unique local services that are tailored to the needs of our communities. This can look like partnering with local agencies to provide telehealth, serving as the local food pantry, or operating supply drives for back-to-school, holidays, and emergencies. In short, zones have the flexibility to maximize local impact through creative, community-specific programs.

Incarcerated people are one of the vulnerable populations that human service zones serve. Returning citizens have a high risk of experiencing economic hardship. The reasons for this can vary. There are limitations to what research has shown us about why this happens and how prevalent these causal factors are. However, one study found that a criminal record “reduces the likelihood of a callback [from

a prospective employer] by 50%.”^[1,2] Another study found that 79% of formerly incarcerated individuals reported housing denial or ineligibility because of their conviction history.^[3] Additionally, there are many state and federal policies that create barriers to housing access for formerly incarcerated persons.^[4] These factors, and many others, increase the likelihood that a returning citizen will experience common drivers of recidivism such as unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Zones proactively serve this population by partnering with the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (ND DOCR) to help inmates understand and apply for economic assistance benefits, which ensures that they have continuity of care upon release and promotes the stability that is necessary for a person to move forward after incarceration. House Bill 1549 plays a meaningful role in zone outreach efforts to this population, because it codifies inmate education on these programs as part of the discharge process.

However, economic assistance programs are just one aspect of human-centered, rehabilitative criminal justice practices. The collaborative relationship between DOCR and HHS has resulted in the identification of other areas where policy and practice can be better aligned, and HB 1549 catalyzes that alignment. It ensures that former inmates have support to get a photo ID, which is needed to apply for jobs and housing. To better support returning Native American citizens, this bill provides for a specific Native American reentry program and ensures that tribal leaders have a prominent voice in its development and administration. House Bill 1549 also provides funding to help DOCR cover the costs associated with executing these enhancements, including the funds for a skilled justice reinvestment coordinator. Finally, this bill will provide the legislature with data that is both local and current so that as a state, we can make informed decisions about future program enhancements and investments.

Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, as a human service zone director, I have participated in outreach to inmates. This includes educating individuals on our public assistance programs and self-service portal and collaborating with my colleagues at Heart River Correctional Center (HRCC) to innovate expanded support for incarcerated parents and their children. House Bill 1549 supports the overall mission of human service agencies in North Dakota, which is to foster positive, comprehensive outcomes by promoting economic, behavioral, and physical health, ensuring a holistic approach to individual and community well-being.

¹ https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/pager/files/pager_ajs.pdf

² <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

³ <https://ellabakercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ <https://niccc.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/consequences>

On behalf of myself and the North Dakota Human Service Zone Directors Association, I support a “do pass” vote on HB 1549. Thank you for your time and consideration.