

Testimony
House Bill 1012 – Department of Human Services Budget
House Appropriations – Human Resources Division
Representative Jon Nelson, Chairman

January 25, 2021

Chairman Nelson and Members of the House Appropriations Committee – Human Resources Division:

My name is Lorena Poppe. I am the owner and executive director of Poppy's Promise, a Bismarck-based provider of In-Home Support services through the Developmental Disabilities traditional Home and Community Based Waiver. I am testifying today in support of the Department of Human Services budget, particularly that of the Developmental Disabilities Division, with amendments.

I started Poppy's Promise in the Fall of 2017 in response to families of kids with disabilities expressing there was a shortage of providers to be available to meet the needs of their children and families. My goals were to 1) be another option as families seek out services that will best meet the needs of their children, and 2) meet kids and families where they are at on their unique journeys to full inclusion and participation in home and community life. We believe strongly in designing supports that will help to keep kids in their family homes and communities and minimize the need for institutionalization in a place that is unfamiliar to the child. In our short existence, we have seen the difference a small provider organization can make and are proud that we have been part of keeping families together in their home communities.

I am the sole owner of Poppy's Promise. I started my business by getting a Small Business Administration loan and taking a leap of faith. I knew there was a need, but understand now more than ever, 3 ½ years later, how critical it is that DD providers be supported to do the important work of helping people with disabilities achieve maximum health, happiness and freedom of choice across their lifetimes. At Poppy's Promise, we operate on a month-to-month basis without having a large financial reserve to fall back on. Since opening the doors at Poppy's Promise, I have been excited to see other new provider organizations popping up across the state. This is an exciting thing for North Dakota and I believe there is definitely a place for new organizations that can work together with longstanding providers to assure gaps in services are filled and people can receive supports and services in the least restrictive setting.

In listening to the budget detail of the DD Division of the Department of Human Services, I am concerned that new providers and those that are smaller and more specialized are not being fully considered. Specifically regarding the In-Home Supports program, you heard testimony from the Department indicating that program had the largest drop in utilization over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (27%). And yet, In-Home Supports was left out of the Appendix K option to receive retainer payments to help providers stay in business during the pandemic. For providers of services that were eligible to receive retainer payments, those payments were an important part of keeping the doors of those businesses open. With the current extension of the Appendix K, there is an opportunity for the Department to extend the retainer payment option to those providers most in need and help to assure the services families rely upon don't disappear.

Another area of concern for all providers of DD services, but especially small providers, is the intention of the Department of Human Services to require providers to absorb the cost of accreditation necessary to maintain DD licensure. Because DHS contracts with one organization for accreditation, the Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL), providers would be forced to pay several thousands of dollars toward the accreditation process. This includes travel and lodging expenses of CQL reviewers coming to North Dakota from across the country. There is no reimbursement for accreditation built into the DHS budget. Poppy's Promise does not have the ability to cover that cost. I believe strongly in review processes being in place to assure quality of services, but also know the reality of trying to maintain a business that does not have the ability to set aside thousands of dollars for unreimbursed licensure requirements.

I come before you today to ask that you consider the current state of services for people with disabilities during an ongoing pandemic, the financial vulnerability of new and small providers, and the addition or preservation of funds to assure all providers who are relied on heavily by the citizens of North Dakota are able to survive and stand strong in continuing to provide supports and services.

Thank you for your time today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.