

Testimony
House Bill 1012 (DHS Appropriation)
House Appropriations- Human Resources Division
Representative Nelson, Chairman
January 25, 2021

Chairman Nelson, Members of the House Appropriations Committee, I am Stacey Hunt, Licensed Clinical Psychologist in the state of North Dakota and Chief Executive Officer of St. Thomas Counseling Center, PLLC, in Jamestown. I am here today to provide information on House Bill 1012.

House Bill 1012 is a bill for an Act providing an appropriation for defraying the expenses of the Department of Human Services. This bill provides funds for the ND Behavioral Health Division's Substance Use Disorder Voucher program. I am here today in support of the SUD Voucher program.

St. Thomas Counseling Center, PLLC, is a mental health and addiction counseling center in Jamestown. We employ a Licensed Addiction Counselor and are licensed by the ND Department of Human Services Behavioral Health Division for Adult Level 2.1 (Intensive Outpatient Program) and Level 1 (Individual and Aftercare) treatment services. We accept commercial insurances and are approved providers for the Behavioral Health Division SUD Voucher program, which provides a funding source for substance use disorder treatment for people who do not have insurance and cannot afford treatment. Potential clients are generally referred to us from Parole and Probation, district court, local clinics, or from South Central Human Service Center.

The Behavioral Health Division SUD Voucher program was created to allow less chronic substance users seeking treatment to access services

at a community provider so the human service centers could focus on serving the high-risk, chronically addicted population. During the current biennium, St. Thomas Counseling Center has treated 101 clients who used the SUD Voucher to pay for services. These clients did not have private insurance and could not qualify for ND Medicaid or Sanford Expansion insurances. Without the SUD Voucher program to pay for services, these clients would have had to go to the Human Service Centers to receive services; thus taking resources away from the chronic, core population the HSCs are intended to serve. Unfortunately, the appropriations for the SUD Voucher were exhausted as of June 30, 2020, and we had to start turning clients away. These last six months have been difficult for not only our business, but also for potential clients who may have lost their jobs because of COVID related reasons, or are realizing that their use of substances during COVID quarantines is problematic and want to seek treatment. Because the SUD Voucher is exhausted, these ND citizens have to attempt to find treatment at the Human Service Centers.

The people we see at St. Thomas Counseling Center are typically individuals whose use of drugs or alcohol has caused some significant concern in their life, but can usually get back on track after addressing their addiction issues. For instance, a DUI may cause the person to lose their job, and with it their health insurance. They are ordered by the court to have a chemical dependency evaluation, but cannot pay the out of pocket fee. Without their evaluation, they cannot regain their license, cannot regain their job, and likely will continue a cycle of using drugs or alcohol to cope with stress. However, if the person can access the Behavioral Health Division SUD Voucher funding for their evaluation and any subsequent services needed; the person can complete their court

requirements, regain their driver's license, find a job, and change the trajectory of their life.

Additionally, the SUD Voucher provides transportation assistance, so citizens who live in rural areas can access services. Approximately 60% of our Voucher clients live in Jamestown, leaving 40% who travel from other towns in South Central ND, including Valley City, Oakes, LaMoure, Napoleon, Carrington, Cooperstown, and Edgeley. There are no substance use treatment providers in those areas, which means without the Voucher's transportation assistance, approximately 45 clients would not have been able to access services with us this biennium.

Funding for the SUD Voucher is included in the Behavioral Health Division budget appropriation. Testimony from the BHD indicates that Voucher funding will be exhausted prior to the end of the biennium. I feel that this program is a needed and valuable resource to the citizens of North Dakota and now advocate for the funding to not only be continued, but to be increased for the 2021-2023 biennium, so we can continue to provide a continuum of SUD treatment options among private and public providers.

Thank you for allowing me to speak on this issue. This concludes my testimony and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.