

Testimony on House Bill HB1012  
2021 Legislative Session  
January 24, 2021

Rep. Nelson, Chairman; House Appropriations-Human Resources Division

---

Good morning, Chairman Nelson and members of the committee. My name is Sarah Carlson. I live in Dickinson, ND and I am writing this, representing my own thoughts and not on behalf of my employers.

Family Voices of North Dakota is statewide health information and education center who serves families of children with special health care needs in ND. Family Voices provides emotional and informational support to many families across North Dakota who have a child who has an ongoing medical diagnosis such as asthma, heart conditions, physical disabilities, and emotional/behavioral issues. The staff provides assistance and care coordination to families by helping them access and navigate services, understand what these services mean, how systems work, where does the funding come from and by providing emotional, informational and educational support information to assist with their unique and individual needs.

This support intersected with my life before my child left the hospital after birth. And again, and again, support and resources were provided because I had a lot of questions and my child's health was very complex. By the time my child was 1, I found myself attending a weekend leadership institute, at no cost to me, to learn more about the structure of funding and services in North Dakota. Shortly after that, I became a staff for Family Voices. Shortly after that, I gained another employer to provide family support focusing on children birth to age 3 for Early Intervention as an Experienced Parent. I then was recruited for the Family Advisory Council for the Department of Health's Special Health Services. And then appointed by the governor for family representation on the Interagency Coordinating Council, where I later held a chair position. I was doing this all while juggling family, raising a baby with complex healthcare needs, and a managing a full time leadership position, at ABLE, Inc., supporting adults with disabilities. I continue to do all of these things, and have served on National committees and speaking at National conferences.

This year, there are some vital funding decisions that are dependent upon your support.

**1. DD Division: Payments for Providers.**

- Please offer your support for a 3%/3% increase. Providers across the state struggle with recruitment and retention of staff. Providers rely heavily upon these increases to both retain existing employees and attract new staff. The majority of the workforce is entry-level direct support staff, who have risked so much in the last year to keep people with very serious health conditions safe from COVID while maintaining quality of life. This increase is critical to continue to provide safe, consistent supports to some of our state's most vulnerable people.

**2. Children and Family Services: Restore \$100,000 to Family Voices.**

**DD Division: Restore Experienced Parent Funding of \$100,000 and reallocate to Family Voices.**

- In 2017, I provided testimony along with many others to secure funding for parent/peer support with the Experienced Parent program. This support to families is critical while they are just starting their journey in services. I recommend restoring the \$100,000 cut from the DD budget and reallocating it to Family Voices of North Dakota. Family Voices is a natural fit to provide these supports to families as they manage Project Carson, a program designed to support mothers who have a prenatal diagnosis or at birth diagnosis for their baby. Connecting this program with existing resources and connections to Early Intervention makes logical sense and does not put pressure on the DD division, to reinvent the wheel on parent support. In addition to the \$100,000 for Experienced Parents (work specifically for families with children birth to age 3), please support a restoration of the \$100,000 that was cut from Children and Family Services. Without this \$200,000 total in the budget to support families, families will suffer and lack the critical support that is needed to provide emotional support and navigate complex systems. I am a reminder that the supports offered by Family Voices. That support has produced a domino effect, by helping mold a leader for this state, and also by continuing to offer that support to other families in the Southwest area of the state. I have personally supported hundreds of families in different capacities navigating birthing support, healthcare, infant development, educational, and employment services for people with special healthcare needs and their families. I receive referrals from all avenues, most often from professionals, silo-ed in one of those services mentioned. I do not believe that I would have been able to provide supports to other families if Family Voices did not first reach out to offer support to me and my family. Let my story be an example of the tremendous benefit these services have provided, and need to be continued for families across ND.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please support these necessary changes.

Sarah Carlson

Cell: 515.450.7378

skunkriverstudio@gmail.com