

Testimony Prepared for the
House Human Services Committee

January 12, 2021

By: Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

RE: House Bill 1091 – Related to Shelter Care Services and Foster Care

Chairman Weisz and members of the House Human Service Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I serve as the Director of Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone which includes the service area of Traill and Steele Counties. In addition, I am a current member of the North Dakota County Director's Association. Please consider my testimony in support of House Bill 1091.

Human service zones are responsible for the care, custody, and placement of children in the North Dakota foster care system. There are 19 children currently ordered by the Juvenile Court to be in my legal custody, care, and control as a human service zone director. Part of the responsibility and duty as legal custodian is to ensure proper placement of children in which we are responsible. At times, we are faced with emergency situations, a lack of available placements, and/or faced with the need to take a step back and closely evaluate specialized needs of a child as unique or challenging factors are presented. Yet other times, a temporarily placement is needed so that protective measures can be implemented, and a foster care placement can be diverted. HB 1091, if enacted, would support human service zones with this important responsibility of child placement.

Currently, there are three licensed shelter care/assessment programs in North Dakota. These facilities are important to supporting the foster care system. However, due to technical challenges this type of placement has not been eligible for approved funding. Rather, custodial agencies have historically needed to use other funds, often local funds, to pay for this

foster care related cost. SB 1091 would provide for a certification process for shelter care programs which will allow the use of non-federal funds for this important service. This closes this funding gap and helps meet a long-term need. In addition, HB 1091 provides important accountability while requiring that shelter care programs to be subject to set standards.

While I stand in support of HB 1091, there is concern regarding Section 4, Lines 18-19. This section seeks to limit shelter care placements to no greater than *seven days* upon service certification by the department. I understand the need to set a time-limit. It is important that we stay diligent to locate appropriate and supportive placements for foster children. However, there may be individualized circumstances where the need for a child to continue in a certified shelter care bed may be warranted. For example, a time-limited extension may be warranted if we are awaiting results from medical or psychological evaluation which would be key to determining the best level of care needed to meet that child's individualized needs.

The committee may opt to consider amendment, to provide for a provision for a shelter care extension request, subject to rulemaking. Such process would allow DHS to extend fiscal support for certified shelter care in specific, approved situations. This flexibility would help support individualized needs of children in the foster care system who may benefit from a brief, extended placement at the certified shelter care placement level.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1091. I stand available to the committee for questions.