

Testimony Prepared for the
Senate Judiciary Committee
March 23, 2021

By: Rhonda Allery, Mountain Lakes Human Service Zone Director, and Member
of the Juvenile Justice State Advisory Group.

RE: House Bill 1035– NDCC 27-20, the Uniform Juvenile Court Act

Chairwoman Larson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I am Rhonda Allery, the Director of Mountain Lakes Human Service Zone. Mountain Lakes Human Service Zone services the counties of Benson, Ramsey, Rolette and Towner County. I am a member of the North Dakota Social Service Director Association, and a member of the Juvenile Justice State Advisory Group. Please consider my testimony in support of House Bill 1035. I have also worked directly with children and families in Benson and Ramsey Counties for 17 years doing child protection assessments and follow-up case management services in the child welfare unit.

The rewrite and or update of North Dakota's Juvenile Court code or HB 1035 has been in the making for 5 years or more. The code has not been updated for many years and many people including members of the house judiciary committee worked hard to produce this great legislation.

The proposed legislation is in step with evidence-based practice for better outcomes for children and families in our state. It will ensure low risk youth are served and have access to services without ever entering the juvenile justice system, provides the framework for collaboration in communities to bring entities together in a systematic way to serve children more effectively, and provides for evidenced based assessments that assess risk to ensure appropriate level of supervision for children to ensure appropriate services and public safety.

-Keeping children out of the juvenile justice system-

Children in need of services, (CHINS) will be served according to their needs without entering the court system. From the nuts-and-bolts perspective, this change makes sense for families and children. The changes emphasize using evidenced based assessments to look at overall needs of the child and the family while engaging parents to be actively involved in services for their children. Human Service Zone's Child Welfare units specialize in exactly this- connecting children with behavioral health programming, engaging parents in meeting their child's needs and keeping children home with their families while receiving the services they need to be successful. It is a good fit. This proposed legislation will effectively drive policies and procedures that empower parents to meet their children's needs, and work towards solutions without entering the the juvenile court system.

Staggered implementation to ensure community services and collaborations are in place.

The implementation plan is staggered as collaborative efforts to better serve children and families are developed. Training professionals to do this work and collaborations will be pursued with behavioral health providers, community supports, schools, medical providers, and local mentoring programs. The delayed implementation is crucial to ensure the foundation is adequate to successfully serve children and families in North Dakota and effectively keep them out of the juvenile justice system.

Research based guidelines for matching youth with appropriate supervision and disposition if they do enter the juvenile justice system.

Again, an important change in this legislation is the use of evidenced based tools to assess risk for children and risk to the public. Evidence based assessments will lead to better use of community resources, engage the correct services at the correct time and reduce the use of detention and out of home placement for children.

The legislation also calls for the coordination of services and collaboration by service providers to keep children out of placement and home with their families in their communities.

This is a monumental change in the juvenile court code and is long overdue. This proposed legislation emphasizes/promotes and sets the tone to keep children in their homes and engage parents to use their natural family and community supports to successfully address their child's needs in their home and in in their own community.

This concludes my testimony.