

**March 8, 2023**

## **YWCA CASS CLAY SUPPORTS SB 2003**

eliminating racism  
empowering women  
**ywca**  
cass clay

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Erin Prochnow CEO at YWCA Cass Clay. Our agency offers the largest Emergency Shelter for women and their children escaping domestic violence and homelessness in North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota. We have done so for 45 years. We also operate a sizeable Supportive Housing Program serving 80 households in Fargo and West Fargo, that, after emergency shelter, is the long-term solution for healing, stability, and independence - diminishing the likelihood women will return to abusive partners or return to homelessness.

**YWCA Cass Clay supports the North Dakota Attorney General Budget line item 14 relating to human trafficking victim grants proposed in SB 2003 at the governor's recommendation of \$1,113,218.**

YWCA Cass Clay created North Dakota's first dedicated housing units for trafficking victims and their children in 2015. Since opening an emergency shelter in 1978, we have encountered a recurring narrative of partners who groom women romantically, then eventually force or manipulate them into commercial sex. Others have traffickers who are family. Some entered the sex trade as their only means for survival.

Decades-deep experience informs YWCA service delivery, and we participate in North Dakota's Human Trafficking Task Force. In a culture where survivors face criminalization and shame, YWCA brings compassion and nonjudgement to women who've been maltreated, dehumanized, and are now shaping new lives.

Since the program was established through collaborative partnerships with other service providers, state support through this grant funding and federal sources through the Office of Victims of Crime of the US Justice Department, YWCA has provided over 200 survivors of human trafficking more than 8,300 nights of safe shelter in the dedicated two units. In this biennium, an estimated 40 survivors will be provided approximately 1,400 nights of safe shelter through a grant from the Attorney General's Office of just under \$90,000 per biennium. Of those served last year, 48% were Native American, 29% Black, 23% White and stayed an average of 80 days.

At YWCA, this funding supports a part time advocate position, funds the operations of the two units, a one-bedroom apartment and a two-bedroom apartment. Referrals for service come from across North Dakota. Providing supportive services to human trafficking survivors is different than providing services to a domestic violence survivor. **These dedicated units and support staff have been essential in helping 200 survivors over the past seven years move forward with their lives and work towards recovering from the trauma of being sold for sex.**

**This is the true life experience of one woman we served in our Human Trafficking Program.**

Her name is Jodi.

Homeless, she came to YWCA. During intake, she was closed off and gave short answers. It's not unusual. We experience it all the time. In that first hour, we don't force answers past "Are you actively using drugs?" — the sort of questions that ensure safety of others we serve.

Jodi asked about the room where she would sleep: would she have it to herself? And furtive questions about the beds.

We came to discover Jodi had night terrors and incontinence. Bedwetting is something most grow out of as kids. But not Jodi.

**We came to understand that many had let Jodi down in her past, including systems meant to help her.**

You see, Jodi had grown up in the foster system in western North Dakota. At age 8, when most girls have Barbie dolls and second-grade giggles, Jodi was sex trafficked for the first time by her foster family. **Sex trafficked at age 8.**

For years, her body was repeatedly exploited and frequently sold to adult men.

Bedwetting was her body and mind's manifestation of trauma, distressed by assault as a young girl. Trauma to the soul beyond Jodi's deep brown eyes was compounded by many hurts and suffering.

After years of trafficking, Jodi found that drugs and alcohol were a reliable antidote to numb the pain of her existence. She became pregnant and had a baby. Then lost custody because no one ever properly cared for her or taught her how to care for a child.

**Once inside YWCA, we quickly saw it best to move Jodi to our Human Trafficking Unit and programming where her advocate hit the ground running.**



Her YWCA Advocate Sonya made an appointment and went along with her to the Homeless Health clinic in downtown Fargo to address her bedwetting and night terrors. Jodi saw an exceptional Nurse Practitioner named Whitney Fear, who's Native American like Jodi.

A scared Jodi asked Sonya to go along to all appointments. Our Human Trafficking Advocate prefers this, sometimes helping head off probing questions about STDs or others tinged with judgement when asked by even the most compassionate medical professionals. Jodi had been given many diagnoses over the years, but her trauma had never been addressed.

With this care, Jodi's esteem and health gradually grew. Sonya was her collaborator. Not an expert on Jodi's life, but someone alongside her to empower her. Empowerment is woven into everything we do at YWCA.

**Jodi worked hard to heal and plan for the future, and she was able to apply for housing while staying in our programming.** Sonya helped her move into her place and furnish it through a referral to a partner agency.

Today, Jodi lives on her own in her apartment and remains connected to many community-based services. She has worked toward regular visitation with her daughter.

Two generations move forward with pasts no longer overshadowing their futures.

**We don't do this work alone, and we need your continued partnership.** YWCA was here for Jodi and other survivors because the Attorney General and state funding made our work possible. I urge you to continue investing in changing the lives of women and children who have been victimized and deserve better.