

Testimony from Erin Prochnow, CEO, YWCA Cass Clay

North Dakota House Appropriations Committee

January 12, 2023

HB 1014

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 Housing Finance Agency (NDHFA) acquiring the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) and North Dakota Homeless Grant (NDHG) from the North Dakota Department of Commerce. Additionally, YWA Cass Clay supports the recommendation of appropriating \$25 million to the Housing Incentive Fund (HIF).

Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) and North Dakota Homeless Grant (NDHG)

In our judgement and experience in working with the NDHFA team, they have demonstrated repeatedly that they maintain the knowledge, understanding, and administrative expertise to manage both ESG and NDHG. These two programs are primarily utilized to

supplement direct service programs such as those provided at YWCA. Additionally, the NDHFA administers the three critical federal programs many homeless service providers access to provide shelter and supportive housing programs including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care (CoC), HOME and Housing Trust Fund programs; the NDHFA team understands the existing nuances and compliance regulations required by HUD. To my understanding, there is limited full time staff equivalent implications in this transition. The shift from North Dakota Department of Commerce to the NDHFA will help maintain the funding at the federal ESG because the NDHFA team understands the regulatory mandates and can streamline communication channels with service providers.

In the 2021-2023 biennium, YWCA was awarded approximately \$100,000 through the competitive NDHG process to help purchase food in our emergency shelter and provide homeless prevention and rapid rehousing support in the form of limited rental assistance to those facing eviction. The ESG competitive award to YWCA in the 2021-2023 biennium was \$65,000, primarily supporting basic services such as electricity costs to maintain the emergency shelter. The state appropriates funding to leverage federal ESG funding, and YWCA is supportive of the state leverage as it helps provide safety and security to more than 1,250 people facing violence and homelessness at YWCA annually, or 2,500 people over the biennium.

North Dakota Housing Incentive Fund (HIF)

Affordable housing is a critical component of our infrastructure in North Dakota. Approval of HB 1014, inclusive of the provisions of the North Dakota Housing Incentive Fund (HIF) program at the recommended \$25 million, will greatly impact organizations like YWCA in

providing affordable supportive to citizens of our state. In the case of YWCA it will provide a pathway for women and children out of harm's way from dangerous abuse and homelessness. It will also deliver the highly effective strategy of affordable housing combined with human support from a housing caseworker. Supportive Housing stabilizes families and prevents use of other more costly resources.

The solution to homelessness is housing. Investing in affordable rental housing is critical to the ideal of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Despite the effectiveness of supportive housing, only a portion of the people who would benefit most actually receive it. In 2021, 292 women and children applied to gain access to our YWCA Supportive Housing Programs, but only 46 women and children – 16% - were accepted.

In 2015, YWCA saw a need for increased supportive housing because too often our caring advocates were witnessing survivors of violence returning to abusive partners because they had no other independent alternative. Often, an abuser's power and control traps domestic violence survivors economically - 99% of domestic violence survivors are victims of economic abuse. YWCA set a bold goal in 2015 to significantly grow our supportive housing program. At that time, the agency supported 18 units of housing. That number is 80 today. With the addition later this year of YWCA's new supportive housing initiative, Lantern Light (described in more detail below), YWCA will provide supportive housing to more than 95 families. Tonight, 250 people will sleep in safe YWCA supported housing, children will be off to school, and survivors of violence will be able to hold steady jobs because of the stability and care provided through supportive housing.

Even with expansion of YWCA's Grace Garden housing initiative through the help of NDHFA in 2019, we simply don't have enough affordable homes to meet community need. A large body of research shows that most people who live in supportive housing can remain stably housed in the community, making it the most cost-effective prevention to homelessness.

Our own numbers substantiate this fact: at YWCA, the cost of emergency shelter is \$66 per night while supportive housing at YWCA is \$18 per night. It costs 72% less to provide supportive housing. This economical resource is a path to safety and financial security for women, at the same time lessening use of emergency, health care and other resources.

An example of the Housing Incentive Fund in action is in YWCA's recent purchase of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Sisters) Sacred Heart Convent. YWCA has partnered with the Sisters by leasing 16 units of supportive housing dating back to 2006 in three locations. YWCA is currently renovating the former convent into 23 affordable supportive housing apartments, named Lantern Light. Construction is underway with plans to open in the fall of 2023. A recent news Fargo Forum article from December 27, 2022, on this initiative is attached on page 7 of this testimony. HIF dollars provide a companion tool to federal resources to make affordable housing possible not only for new construction, a remodel such as Lantern Light, but also to help make certain that existing affordable supportive housing units are preserved.

On average, a woman stays in the YWCA Supportive Housing Program just 24 months. It's a short time in which families break the cycles of poverty and violence. A woman who participates in the YWCA Supportive Housing Program earns more money, is healthier, and

better equipped to live independently and create an environment for her children to thrive. In 2022:

- 60% of participants increased their education or income level
- 71% of participants improved their health and wellness
- 70% of participants reduced their use of emergency services
- 87% of participants obtained stable housing upon exiting the program

Recently, a woman named Jessica served by YWCA at Grace Garden said, “I really don’t think I could have made it this far without you. I appreciate everything you guys do. Sometimes I still feel like I’m in a dream. I never imagined that I could have made it this far in this little amount of time. I’m very thankful.”

When a woman, like Jessica, arrives at the YWCA, she often lacks the building blocks to independence: a living wage, adequate credit, childcare and transportation. Our comprehensive programs and services help women overcome these barriers.

In 2022, the average stay at our Emergency Shelter was 50 days. While women can make significant progress in just over a month, this is typically not enough time to gain enduring financial security and self-reliance. Women must recover physically and mentally from abuse. She may have a disability, or need to attend school, or be working hard to regain credit history and financial footing.

The HIF requires 10% of the fund be set aside to provide necessary and life-changing supportive services. YWCA Advocates provide stability and a light hand of support to help

women troubleshoot and problem-solve setbacks in life. Supportive services help vulnerable people who have histories of trauma, chronic health conditions, poverty or other struggles come to thrive in the community. In our experience, beyond rental assistance, survivors gain a YWCA housing advocate as their human support. Advocates are difference-makers who help women gain jobs and education, overcome obstacles related to childcare, car breakdowns, health setbacks and more. They skillfully use an empowerment approach that helps women summon their own courage and grow in problem-solving and resolve. Women are guided to set concrete goals. They gain caring encouragement that helps them stay focused on convictions they've set. As women grow in personal autonomy, they avoid the paths of returning to abusers, substance dependency, or interaction with costly social systems like emergency care, law enforcement, the foster system and more. Tenants grow abilities to stay housed. They become healthier and reconnect to the community. They lead lives on paths of their own choosing. Supportive services are a proven and cost-effective way to reduce shelter occupancy and the homeless population, breaking the cycles of poverty and violence.

Wherever a woman may be on her journey, together we must walk alongside her to ensure she has access to the tools and resources necessary to heal, reach her goals and ultimately, build a future free from violence for their family.

LOCAL NEWS

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Ryan Longnecker / WDAY TV

Erin Prochnow, CEO of YWCA of Cass-Clay, walks through the remodeling of the former Sacred Heart Convent in south Fargo. The site will now become "Lantern Light." It will provide apartment living for those women and children escaping violence in the home.

YWCA making progress on convent remodel for Lantern Light

By Kevin Wallevand
WDAY

Fargo

For years, Fargo's Presentation Sisters used their convent on the city's south side to launch projects for helping the poor and those without housing.

But now, a familiar face is at the convent months after the sisters moved from there.

The YWCA plans to remodel the convent and provide safe, affordable housing for families escaping domestic violence.

"Eventually, on the first floor will be a two-bedroom, handicap-accessible unit," said Erin Prochnow, YWCA

Cass Clay CEO, as she toured the convent now undergoing a huge, multimillion-dollar renovation project.

Prochnow knows housing. As the YWCA's longtime CEO, she knows what survivors of domestic violence need.

"We are going to create, like a hotel, a business center. There will be a business center with laptops so women can apply for jobs and to seek out other opportunities. That is what we have identified as a need, along with classrooms," Prochnow said.

That is why she is so excited about Lantern Light, a YWCA-supported residence now under construction.

"We know the answer to

homelessness is affordable, supportive housing, which the YWCA has worked to grow," she said. "We have expanded from 19 units in 2015 to 95 units by the end of next year throughout the community, in addition to operating the region's largest shelter serving women and children adjacent to here. It will be a campus-like environment for women facing violence."

What for so many years was the Presentation Sisters' convent will now be the safe home for 23 families who are survivors of domestic violence and often homeless.

The irony of this new project: the name Lantern Light. A way to honor the

years of ministry of the Presentation Sisters in Fargo. Through their founder Nano Nagle who, although rich, was known to carry a lantern through the streets of Cork, Ireland, helping impoverished women and children.

"We have partnered with the Presentation Sisters for so long. It is repurposing something and honoring their legacy, and something we care so strongly about," Prochnow said.

The bottom line: The YWCA's shelter is full.

"Seventy-three today, 37 of whom are children," Prochnow said, referring to the number of people at the shelter nightly this week in

Fargo.

This new building will not be a shelter, but housing. More efficient, cheaper.

"When they walk into this apartment when it is done, they will have a place to call home, they will be safe and have an environment for their children to thrive and not live in fear. That is absolutely what it is about," Prochnow said.

Millions of dollars have been secured for the project, but the YWCA is now raising nearly \$4 million to get the project done. An endowment is also in the works.

To support the mission, go to the YWCA's website at www.ywcacassclay.org.