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House Appropriations Committee - Human Resources Division
Testimony in Support of DHHS Budget - Aging Services, Voc Rehab
March 9, 2023

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Chairman Nelson and members of the House Appropriations Committee, Human Resources Division,

The intention of this testimony is to provide glowing praise for the Aging Services Division, Vocational Rehabilitation Division, and DHHS as a whole, while attempting to show that the crisis of aging is on par with other health issues that get much more attention.

North Dakota faces dramatic challenges when it comes to its aging population. People 65-and-older make up the fastest growing population in the state. According to data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and analyzed by the ND Center for Social Research at North Dakota State University, in 2020 residents aged 65 and older made up more than 16 percent of the population. That information is not unique in North Dakota. What is unique, however, is where these people live and the threat of isolation in the state's rural counties. The populations in 17 of North Dakota's 47 counties include 25-percent or more of their residents who are 65 or older. According to data from the United Health Foundation, more than 10-percent of them live alone where isolation can be both sad and fatal.

Compounding the problem is an unprecedented shortage in health care workers. This dilemma faces nearly every state in the country. In a healthcare workforce analysis published by Mercer the U.S. will face a shortage of nearly 450,000 home health aides and another 95,000 nursing assistants. These are the paid workers who primarily assist people who prefer to live in their own homes and communities.

What makes it additionally challenging in rural states like North Dakota is that small towns and regions are already facing an exodus of people. Attracting new people to small, rural communities is nearly impossible. Returning to the demographic data provided by ND Center for Social Research (sited above) 34 of the state's 47 counties have populations of 10,000 or more people. The vast majority of those same counties (24 of 47) recorded a population loss between 2010 and 2020.



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That puts a huge burden on those unpaid, family and community caregivers to support their friends and loved ones as they age.

AARP's 2020 Caregiving in the U.S. Report identifies many staggering statistics including the fact there are more than 53-million family caregivers, a dramatic increase of nearly 10 million people in just five years. And that number will most likely rise with increasing health care needs of the baby boomer population. The numbers are staggering enough, but include information like 21-percent of those caregivers say their own health is poor to fair, 61-percent also work, and 45-percent say their caregiving costs them their own money, and the impact becomes exceedingly dramatic.

I spent time highlighting the problems because it's important to understand that the work ahead is difficult. There no quick fixes. But, I believe sustained commitment and creative investment can have a profound impact on the future.

Historically, North Dakota has lagged behind in its reliance on institutional settings. But the tide is turning and Aging Services has led the way. Nancy Nikolas Maier has provided the committee with extensive details about its work to meet the demands of the DOJ settlement. As someone who works with aging North Dakotans on a daily basis and sits on the Governor's Committee on Aging, I can attest that the work being done is significant and impactful.

For the Division to continue on this path, it will need adequate funding and support from every level of state government.

Additionally, we work closely with the Vocational Rehabilitation Division as it executes a plan to improve North Dakotas workforce by matching people who want to work with businesses and organizations who are desperately trying to fill positions.

By helping individuals overcome limitations, they are helping North Dakotans live fulfilling lives. Our nonprofit has seen a steady increase of communication and referrals from vocational rehabilitation counselors looking for solutions that will help their clients land meaningful jobs and keep them for years to come. We've been impressed with how quickly new counselors grasp the value of their work. They too understand the need to think out of the box to solve complex problems, both for individuals and the state.

Our addition to the innovative solutions needed for North Dakotans is through the monumental impact of assistive technology (AT). AT is basically any device that helps someone overcome a



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limitation. It can be weighted silverware so someone with Parkinson's can continue to eat independently, it can be electronic reminders to help someone with Autism get to school on time, it can be devices to track people with Alzheimer's who wander, or lift chairs, or ramps, or amplified telephones for those with hearing loss. You name it, there's a piece of technology that can help.

At ND Assistive, **we serve people of every age across the entire state.** We do so by helping connect them with these life-changing devices through demonstrations, trial loans, and a number of programs that can help them get the devices for free or reduced costs.

AT can directly address isolation by making communication easier. During the pandemic, the state of North Dakota worked with us to get iPads in the hands of individuals in nursing homes so they could communicate with loved ones who were no longer allowed to visit in person. We ended up serving nearly every nursing facility in the state in some way and the feedback we've received has been tremendous. But iPads with Zoom or some other application are only a small way AT helps with communication and/or isolation. Just having a telephone that allows the listener hear the person on the other end opens up lines of communication that otherwise become frustrating for people on both ends of the conversation. There are dozens of amplified phones available. There are also phones designed for those with low vision, or those dealing with cognitive or mobility issues.

Premature institutionalization can come from many different things. Lack of housing and transportation being two big issues. But it also happens when activities of daily living become difficult and people believe the only way to address their needs is by moving to a facility. AT exists to help with just about any daily activity you can imagine, including toileting, bathing, dressing, cooking, eating, and cleaning. Safety is also a big issue. We get many requests for alerting and alarm systems. Those are pretty common. But often people are unaware there are devices that can help with medication management (this one is huge!), fall risks, recognition (like not hearing smoke alarms or doorbells), and memory loss, just to name a few.

AT can also help with the workforce and caregiver issues. Solutions include smart home and monitoring technologies. There are devices that can allow one caregiver to monitor situations of multiple clients at one time and/or give a family member peace of mind that they can "drop-in" whenever they are needed. The learning curve is not nearly as steep with these devices as many assume, plus, the cost is much less too.



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This last section was certainly a plug for AT and our nonprofit, but more so, it was meant to show you that innovative ideas do exist and solutions are available. DHHS, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Aging Services know what they're doing. They know investing in things like AT can not only help solve some of these huge issues facing the state, they know in the long run it also makes a significantly positive financial impact.

On paper, these budgets may look big. But the investment is worthwhile and the foresighted will see there is a dramatic return on these investments.

If you would like to know more about why we support DHHS, Aging Services and Voc Rehab so much, or about our nonprofit's work, please contact me by email mchaussee@ndassistive.org or phone (701) 551-7079.