

Testimony In Support of Senate Bill #2012  
03-10-23

Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Christal Halseth. I am the Executive Director of the Northern Plains Children's Advocacy Center in Minot, ND. We serve multiple counties in the northwest and northcentral regions of North Dakota, including two Native American reservations and Minot Air Force Base. Our offices are located in Minot, Williston, and Bottineau. I am here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 2012.

Every day, there are reports of child abuse made in ND. To the public, and in media reports, the children in these stories are simply Jane Doe or John Doe. This anonymity is a much-needed protection for the child -- but it also makes it easier - too easy - for our community to distance ourselves from the reality of this crisis. The crisis of sexual abuse and other crimes committed against children in ND and beyond.

For the staff at every children's advocacy center, who respond to the most severe cases, each and every child and their story is known. Because of our ND children's advocacy centers, each child can tell their story – fully, and without the fear placed on them by their abuser. The child is believed. The child is protected. And each child receives expert-level care throughout the entirety of their case. **There is no other nonprofit this fully integrated in child abuse cases.** No other nonprofit works this

collaboratively with law enforcement, Human Services, the States Attorney's office, and medical providers – representatives of which stand with me today.

Last year, the NPCAC in Minot served over 600 children and their nonoffending family members. The demand for our services continues to grow every year.

Last year, CAC staff in Minot:

- Interviewed 273 children who were victims of sexual abuse and other crimes. This is often the first time a child has told their full story to someone who believes them.
- Our staff provided comprehensive support services to families experiencing the trauma of abuse. Our Family Advocates provided over 17,000 services in guiding families on a journey no one ever signs up for.
- Child Abuse leaves life-long effects on survivors. They are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, begin early-age drinking and smoking, not finish school, have a teenage pregnancy, be in a domestic violent relationship and grow up to live in poverty. Our therapists conducted over 2,100 hours of evidence-based, trauma-informed therapy to give children and their nonoffending family members life-long tools so that they are not defined by these horrible crimes and have help to reach their full potential. Because child abuse effects the entire family, we offer our services to the entire family. Free of charge.

We see first-hand, the heartbreaking volume of crimes committed against children. But I've also seen the thoughtful, individualized care given to each child and their non-offending family members by CAC staff and partners as we deal with these life-altering experiences. I know of the resilience and bravery survivors demonstrate as they testify in court, facing their offender.

The work children's advocacy centers, law enforcement, Human Services, and prosecution does is hard – it's emotionally demanding, day in and day out. But each day, and each night, this heroic team of experts stand ready to respond to heinous crimes. Each day, they do whatever it takes to get a child to safety, to ensure justice and to restore hope. Each day, they leave their own families to respond to another family's tragedy.

My first day working at a ND CAC, was well over a decade ago. On that day, I met three children whose perpetrator, a family member, molested each one of them. When the oldest sibling reached an age he was no longer interested in, he moved on to the next sibling. The abuse came to light when the oldest child made the decision to come forward.

The children were interviewed individually at the CAC, in a child friendly manner. Each gave detailed accounts of the current and past abuse they endured. They told no one, for years, for fear of breaking up their family, shame, and...because they were afraid no one would believe them. What will stay with me for the rest of my

years, is their parents responding by calling them liars. Although this is not typical of every case, it is a common dynamic we see in many.

But we believed them, law enforcement believed them, and Human Services believed them. Our team worked together for these children. The perpetrator received 40 years in prison for the crimes committed against John Doe 6 years old, John Doe 11 years old, and John Doe 17 years old. We know that the average age individuals who disclose child sexual abuse is 52 years old. Disclosing the details of the crimes committed against them likely would not have occurred if they hadn't come to a children's advocacy center.

Every single child deserves a children's advocacy center involved in every single case. They deserve a group of professionals who believe them and will work to their highest capabilities in seeking justice and providing tools to heal. They deserve the community to come together to help Save Jane Doe and John Doe. Children are carried by each of us, and all of us, whether they are our own child, or our neighbor's child.

Our most common client at the Minot CAC is a 12-year-old girl, molested by someone she knows, someone who is trusted to care for her. We want the community to know that behind every Jane Doe, 12 years old, is a story of abuse, a story of adults failing children – but also a story of resiliency and possibility that includes adults who want so desperately to help.

Our state is fortunate to have children's advocacy centers. Every child deserves to have a team of experts respond to them when they are abused, investigate their case, assess their safety, prosecute their perpetrator, and provide their treatment. We know that there is not one agency who has the ability to respond effectively to crimes against children. We must do it together as a team, because children are carried by each of us and all of us. THERE is no greater issue than the abuse of our children. Not one. Our ND children's advocacy centers bring together the professionals to create the team that is needed to respond. No agency or family ever receives a bill for our services. In order to maintain this standard and grow with the needs of the children in ND, we ask that state appropriated funds increase in order to allow us to continue doing what we do.

Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today and I will be happy to answer any of your questions.