

Testimony

Senate Bill #2012

Chairman Nelson

House Appropriations Committee:

Human Resources Division

March 12th, 2023

Chairman Nelson and members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 2012. I am in support of SB 2012 but also to request an amendment to it for crisis services for youth at risk throughout the state of North Dakota. I am Erica Markle, I am the Transitional Youth Services Program Administrator at Fraser, Ltd. in Fargo. I provide program oversight for Stepping Stones Resource Center: our resource center for youth ages 16-26 years of age and their children. We have had the privilege of serving the community through Stepping Stones Resource Center for 14 years. Each year we have been able to grow our outreach and increase the level of support we provide to the community. Our first year of operation we served 338 unique individuals, this past year we served 898 unique individuals; a 166% increase in clients served.

We are at the point now where we have outgrown our current space and are in the process of building a new center in order to accommodate the expansion of our programming, increased number of clients served, and increased need for crisis intervention and wrap around services. 79 percent of the youth we serve at Stepping Stones Resource Center have a mental health diagnosis, 62 percent of the youth have a chemical dependency diagnosis, and 30 percent of the youth we serve are survivors of human trafficking. Having a community space for these individuals to be safe, to get their needs met, and to learn skills is vital to the community.

We have seen a rise in youth coming to us in crisis who are needing immediate services and wrap around support; many of whom we provide lifesaving services for. I can testify to this as several youth have informed me of this after the fact. Our resource center provides crisis intervention in the forms of suicide prevention, responses to overdoses, childcare assistance for overwhelmed caregivers, and assisting individuals in domestic violence situations and human trafficking situations to get away from their abusers and have a safe place to stay and seek services. I have had many youth inform me that they were planning to end their lives before entering into our services. The one that sticks with me the most is an individual showing me their journal, inside was their goodbye note they had made before finding us. They said they created it when they were feeling hopeless. They had called their family and friends all the local shelters but no one had room for them. They had a friend who could not take them in but told them to come to SSRC for our extended hours program. Luckily, they did and are working on their goals and are engaging in mental health assistance and our wrap around case management. Hope and a chance for a better future is what our programming offers.

Stepping Stones Resource Center is structured programmatically using the Transition to Independence Process. This evidence-based model focuses on a strength-based, person-centered approach to assist youth who have emotional and behavioral difficulties. We focus on assisting the youth we serve on their journey to independence through groups, modeling behaviors, and wrap around case management.

Areas of program focus are centered on gaining meaningful employment, continuing education endeavors, finding and securing stable housing, connecting with mental and physical health service providers, and becoming an active member in the community.

In our community and all of North Dakota that there is a growing need for individuals to have access to resources such as free hygiene products, clothing, school supplies, furniture, and food. We have increased the amount of food given to individuals and families by over 60 percent these past three years. There has been an increase of 35 percent in the amount of food we are getting from Great Plains Food Bank for community distribution. We are seeing the high inflation rate on groceries impacting our neighbors; many individuals that used to be able to provide for all their basic needs are needing supports. Their paychecks are not stretching as far as they used to. We meet their immediate needs and also assist them with getting set up with other local agencies and programs to increase their independence.

SSRC serves youth from all over the state. Many individuals come to Fargo for an increase in job opportunities, for our local shelters, for the services offered within our community, and for continuing education. We get referrals from the state hospital, mental health providers around the state, and juvenile facilities for youth in need of intensive services and supports. We are a resource hub for youth in the community. We assist with transportation to appointments, have other providers come on site to meet with clients, and refer clients to community providers for additional supports. We have staff available 24/7 with an on-call system also in place to meet the needs of the clients.

We see the individuals we serve as more than just a number. We know them by name, know their story, and know their dreams. It is due to this connection that we are successful in assisting them in their goals surrounding independence and becoming an integrated member of society. Currently, 54 percent of our youth we serve are employed. We are striving to only increase our community supports.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you Chairman Nelson and members of the House Appropriations Committee.