

Testimony
House Bill No. 1534
House Human Services Committee
Representative Weisz , Chairman
January 23, 2023

Chairman Weisz, and members of the House Human Services Committee, I am Cory Pedersen, Director of the Children and Family Services Section with the Department of Health and Human Services (Department). I appear before you in opposition to House Bill 1534 and ask the committee to give it a do not pass recommendation.

The Department through its Children and Family Services Section (CFS) has been facilitating a work group to discuss the need to offer efficiencies and better streamline the foster and adoption home study efforts. Adults Adopting Special Kids (AASK), the Department's contracted vendor, together with the CFS Adoption Administration and CFS Licensing Unit have been reviewing forms and eliminating duplicative processes wherever possible. What this work group has identified thus far is we often have two parallel processes working in tandem, conducting assessments through two different lenses. The first represents a temporary arrangement - foster care, and the second represents a lifetime commitment - adoption. Our experience tells us that this dual assessment impacts approximately 13% of the licensed foster care provider population.

Overall, adoption assessments are more comprehensive than the current foster care study process. In adoption we are looking to assess the family's ability to provide for the child's safety and well-being for a lifetime, without the supports of an agency that can step in if there are difficulties or if the placement destabilizes.

The "investigation" as referenced in chapter 14-15 of the North Dakota Century Code, and required for most adoption hearings, is more than an adoptive family home study. It provides not only information about the adoptive family, but also about the child and the birth family, and includes a narrative that summarizes the child's placement in the home and a formal recommendation by the agency for the finalization. All of this information is taken into consideration by the judge who is making the finalization decision.

The language proposed in House Bill 1534 will not change the requirement that the family complete background checks for adoption that are separate from foster care as that is a federal requirement of the FBI.

CFS Licensing Unit is less than one year old, and we are committed to continuing our efforts to identify areas where we can improve the process and streamline practices to be more efficient for our providers while balancing what is best for the children and their families who are served by this work.

This concludes my testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.