

Chairman Weisz, and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide you testimony in favor of Senate Bill 2341 today. My name is Laura Feldmann, I am the Executive Director at Home on the Range, a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) near Beach, ND.

Senate Bill 2341 would allow North Dakota to exercise an option under the Family First Prevention Services Act to create a residential program specifically for sexually exploited and trafficked youth. Home on the Range is currently serving this population within the QRTP system. However, the QRTP parameters prevent us from implementing the best practice recommendations for this population, especially regarding lengths of stay.

Home on the Range began tracking our work with sexually exploited and trafficked youth in 2018. Between 2019 and 2022 we have had 154 female admissions. Of those 154 girls, 122 of them were sexually exploited or trafficked. 79% of the ND girls admitted to Home on the Range since 2018 have been sexually exploited or trafficked. Since 2018 Home on the Range has done extensive training, research and hired expert consultants in the field of human trafficking. We have joined with the Bureau of Criminal Investigations, 31:8, the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force, Youthworks, ND Multidisciplinary teams, and numerous others to increase our knowledge, skill set, and provide the best possible programming for these youth.

In the power point PDF you have received, you will find general information about Home on the Range and the work we do. You will see data on the youth we serve and what they bring with them to treatment. You will read the stories of a few of our youth and the unimaginable circumstances they found themselves in, and the lessons they learned while with us. You will see statistics related to what we have seen in our female youth since 2019 related to this issue. You'll find a detailed list of research treatment recommendations for youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and or trafficking. Home on the Range provides treatment to these youth. We are dedicated, passionate and knowledgeable.

There has been a great deal of research about what treatment works best for sexually exploited and trafficked youth. Home on the Range has worked diligently to check off these boxes as we gained expertise over the last several years working with this population. However, one of the key factors to successful treatment is out of our reach. The best research recommends 18-24 months of residential treatment for these youth. Due to the QRTP parameters, our average length of stay for the last year is just under 3 months.

You will see in the power point that 88% of all our female repeat admissions were kids that were sexually exploited and or trafficked. Kids who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking build huge walls to keep outsiders away because of many factors including but not limited to fear, guilt, shame and survival. It takes time, patience and consistency for these youth to consider cracking these concrete walls and risk building new relationships. Therapy can not take place without a relationship. It is the cornerstone to healing.

One of the most successful ways to crack these walls and work with the kids get them to risk building new relationships is by joining with our horses and dogs to do animal-assisted therapy. Our kids have very little success in having safe, reciprocal relationships prior to coming to us. The kids engage with the animals, they find them safe, and good listeners. It never ceases to amaze me how our kids so often feel safer with a 1200-pound animal than they do with most adults. The animals are not judgmental and don't stereotype our kids or blame them for the baggage they brought with them into treatment. A lot of our kids learn what safe relationships look like, and feel like working with our animals. A young person who was passed around and traded for drugs has a whole different experience when every time she walks into the kennel, a rescue dog wags from head to tail excited to see her.

Ending the Game is a curriculum created by Rachel Thomas, who is a survivor and an appointed member of the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. Home on the Range is trained in Ending the Game, which is nationally recognized as a promising practice in working with this population. Ms. Thomas and I have had several conversations about our work with her curriculum. Home on the Range is the first, and only program to implement an equine assisted psychotherapy component to her curriculum, and she loves it. Ms. Thomas is so

intrigued that she has highlighted a clip of one of our youth doing a session with her horse on her Ending the Game website. Ms. Thomas has also stated her intentions to come to ND in August and with permission, bring her video crew and interview any willing youth who have been exploited or trafficked about their experiences at Home on the Range. We are making national waves with our program. We could work together to put ND on the national scene of work being done with this population.

We provide best practices, evidenced based programs to our kids designed to teach them how they got into “the life”, how coercion works, what to watch for, and how to get out of “the life” when they are ready. You couple this with skill building in a safe environment, these kids have a chance. What gets in the way, is the current structure required by being a QRTP.

As I mentioned Home on the Range is a QRTP. There are, however, aspects of this structure that are not conducive to some of the best practices identified in the body of research on sexually exploited and trafficked youth.

We agree that children should be placed in home settings as soon as safely possible. The Family First Prevention Services Act itself, however, recognized that there exist some populations who will need additional time. This is why federal law allows QRTPs as well as placements that provide “high quality residential care and support services to children and youth who have been found to be, or are at the risk of becoming, sex trafficking victims, in accordance with each state’s policies and procedures.”

Senate Bill 2341 would allow the state to begin the process of exercising this option under the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Youth who qualify for this program would be of little or no additional cost to the state, they would just be receiving services under a different umbrella. While the length of placement would be longer, the numerous repeat stays is likely to shrink per national research findings. Home on the Range would of course, continue to track length of stay and repeat admissions with both our QRTP and exploited and trafficked specific program, to ensure we are good financial stewards while providing the best care to our youth.

For these reasons, we ask for a Do Pass recommendation on Senate Bill 2341.

Thank you,

Laura Feldmann LCSW

Executive Director

Home on the Range