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"Restoring hope. Building futures. Changing lives."

House Bill No. 1004

Senate HR Appropriations Committee
Testimony presented by Michelle Erickson

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Chairman Dever and members of the Senate HR Appropriations Committee,

Good Morning. My name is Michelle Erickson and I am the Executive Director of the Abused Adult Resource Center (AARC) in Bismarck. AARC is a nonprofit agency that offers services to domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking victims including but not limited to crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional housing, education and employment programming, supervised parenting time services, offender intervention and support groups. AARC serves a seven-county area in South Central North Dakota including Standing Rock Indian Reservation. We currently have 81 employees and operate our programs out of 6 locations. Our almost 3-million-dollar budget consists of approximately 46.7% grant funding, 33.1% thrift store revenue, 2% United Way, and the remaining 16.7% is general donations and fundraising events.

We believe in a holistic approach of meeting our clients where they are and helping them achieve the goals they want to work towards. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB1004.

To illustrate further one of our funding needs, AARC operates the Family Safety Center which is where we provide supervised parenting time and exchanges. The largest percentage of our referrals are through Domestic Violence Protection Orders. Other referrals come from divorce orders, social services and other court orders. In 2022, we provided 719 supervised visits and exchanges. During those 719 services, our staff intervened 38 times. Currently there are no visitation services available in Minot so over the last year, we have had families driving to Bismarck to safely exchange and/or visit their children also. We believe so strongly in this program and that it keeps adults and children safe and provides children with a healthy space to see their parents that we actually operate in the negative every year. In 2022, we supplemented our program from our general donations in the amount of \$43,000. Those funds could have been used elsewhere if we had additional grant funding from the state.

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Lack of funding has also prevented us from increasing our wages in some areas. Currently, our thrift store staff is hired at \$12/hour. Our part time residential advocates at our shelters are hired at \$13.50/hour and our Family Safety Center staff is hired at \$15/hour. We are expected to hire people at those wages that are able to resolve conflicts, think on their feet in emergencies, deescalate tense situations, and be flexible in their work schedules. Unfortunately, with the job market the way it is right now, hiring anyone is difficult. Hiring at non-competitive wages makes it even MORE difficult.

Several of the agencies, including AARC, stepped up to the plate when Lutheran Social Services closed and took on the responsibility of the Domestic Violence Offender Intervention programs. We didn't know for sure HOW we were going to manage it but we knew it was important and by providing these services to our communities, it can only help decrease violence in our communities.

Finally, if the domestic violence/sexual assault agencies in the state aren't able to provide these services, who will? In 2022, AARC served **1313** adult clients. All but 231 of those were victims that sought our help for the first time. We provided shelter and safety to 153 families with 118 children. Where will they get the services they need to break free of those violent relationships if the domestic violence programs are forced to downsize or in some instances possibly close due to lack of funding?

Our mission has been and will always be to break the cycle of violence. We want children to grow up in healthy homes and not mimic the violence they have learned. We want victims to become survivors and understand they have a right to be safe and a right to have peace in their lives and we want to continue to make sure that offenders are held accountable.

I strongly urge you to vote "Do pass – plus" on HB 1004. It is not only the right thing to do for victims but it is the right thing to do for our state to help keep our residents safe.