

TESTIMONY  
Senate Bill 2012  
Senate Appropriations Human Resources Division  
January 25, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Dever and Senators. My name is Julie Erickson and I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of Grand Forks Growth and Support Center (GFGSC) which is a licensed development disabilities provider in Grand Forks. Additionally, I am a parent of a 16-year-old with significant disabilities, and a passionate and dedicated advocate for high quality services for all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

On behalf the North Dakota Association of Community Providers (NDACP), the staff we employ, and most importantly the people who receive our services, I am here to advocate for increased inflationary percentages than what were proposed in the Governor's budget.

These past few years have had immense challenges for all. Almost every person I have engaged in conversation with recently, refers to the major hit the COVID pandemic, and the workforce shortage had on them. Over time, it has become common to talk about these two items as generally as North Dakotans talk about the weather. Since so many businesses and people have been affected by these two items, there is a degree of normalization of the circumstances. However, what we have faced and are currently facing is not normal.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are a resilient group of individuals as they are often used to struggle, getting the short end of the deal, and not having the best the world has to offer. However, coupled with these two extra major factors, they are struggling more now than the average human. The pandemic took away much of their remaining freedoms, basically keeping them locked within their homes. Once the COVID risk decreased, these individuals thought that they would be returning to their "normal" as it was before COVID. They were then hit with another obstacle, very low levels of staffing and huge staffing turnover.

Those of us who lead developmental disability services have seen the opportunity of the perfect storm arising for people with disabilities. It is a chain reaction. Stressful events bring on fear and settling with less than; less money coming in, less money to pay staff, less staff, and less quality services. There is also less options for people with disabilities. Recently, due to staffing shortages and low-quality staff, many people with disabilities do not have a say in where they live, who they live with, and what they do with their time. Their opportunities for work have decreased due to lack of vocational staffing supports. Some individuals have been discharged from residential homes and services due to lack of staff. This is terrifying.

One example of this is a young woman we provide services to who was discharged from her residential services at the beginning of the summer due to low levels of staff employed at the agency. She could not return to her family home as her mother was unable to care for her due to cancer. She then moved in with a family member who also had another child in the home with disability. Her mother then died from cancer, and she lost her mom. Her behavioral needs support levels increased and the family member she was living with was unsure how long she could provide a living environment to her with these extra support needs so her case manager put in a referral for residential services for her for an urgent residential placement. No provider would accept the referral (due to high needs and low staffing). The family member caring for her was drowning in stress. Our agency then stepped in to provide some in home supports and respite hours for the family, but we are not able to provide all the service hours her family needs as we are struggling to have enough staff. I have even had shifts with this amazing young woman so she would have staff to support her and give her caregiver a break. If this living situation does not work for this young lady and no residential placement is found, she will eventually end up living at the Life Skills and Transition Center in Grafton. If this occurs, I feel our system has failed her. This is just one example of the struggles that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities face when there are not enough staff at agencies to keep up with the high demand for those in need of services.

Our industry cannot handle any financial cuts and we are grateful to hear that the Governor's budget did not call for cuts. However, the proposed inflationary increases are just not enough to change the climate of the developmental disability industry and divert the people we provide services to away from the perfect storm. We want them to not only survive but THRIVE! In addition to no cuts, we are requesting an inflationary increase of 5% per year and an equity increase of \$1.88 to each of the service payment brick rates, which will fund all bricks at 100%. We would like the opportunity to pay our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) competitive rates and provide benefits to them that provide them with security.

With security and full DSP positions, developmental disability providers should be able to get back to providing higher quality care, more options for people in their services and strong supports to assist people to live a life they enjoy. This would be a successful and thriving system for some of our most vulnerable residents of North Dakota and it would make North Dakota proud.

Thank you for the opportunity to stand before you and give my testimony regarding Senate Bill 2012. I welcome any questions you may have.

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