

TESTIMONY SB 2215  
Senate Appropriations – Human Resources Division  
February 8, 2023

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Dick Dever and members of Senate Appropriations Human Resources Division. For the record, my name is Tom Newberger and I am the Executive Director for Red River Human Services Foundation in Fargo and Wahpeton, ND. Our agency supports approximately 525 people with developmental disabilities in Residential, Day and Social programs. The focus of my testimony today is related to the latter – Social programs.

I am here today to ask you for support of Senate Bill 2215 that partially supports only two Providers in the State who continue to lose funds every year. The two Development Disability providers are Red River Human Services Foundation (RRHSF) in Fargo and LISTEN in Grand Forks. RRHSF operates the Activity Center and the Activity Center opened originally in the late 1970's by Lutheran Social Services because they provide many needed services that other DD Providers are not able to do for people with disabilities. People with disabilities go to the Activity Center to recreate, socialize and to find a place where they can receive services that gives them a better life. I have been in this business for nearly 37 years and I have seen where our traditional DD services come up short and are not able to give people the choices they need or want. This is where the Activity Center in Fargo and the LISTEN Center in Grand Forks plays a vital role.

The Activity Center adds meanings to people's lives by being a common place where people come together to learn and develop social skills, friendships and how to access the community. It also acts as a safety net when other support systems have failed. For example, many winters ago, a member of the Activity Center called and said she had been sick to her stomach for 3 days and was out of toilet paper, medicine and nearly out of food. Our Activity Center staff went to her apartment, bought her the items she lacked and possibly saved her life. While this is an extreme example, it shows what we do for the less fortunate.

More common activities provided by us include going camping, to ball games, such as the Minnesota Twins who give us free tickets and to parks. These activities add meaning to people's lives by getting them involved, rather than sitting in a group home that is not staffed adequately. We have 7 group homes in Fargo/West Fargo for a total of 35 people. Each home usually has 1-2 Direct Support Professionals (DSP's) in the evenings and it's not possible for the staff to take someone to the park, drop them off, take another

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person to a movie and work with 3 people at home at the same time. This again is where the Activity Center fills a void by providing staff for other DD providers too who are short-staffed.

The story of the Activity Center and LISTEN Center is a long and winding road due to funding constraints. The Activity Center has nearly closed many times, such as when Lutheran Social Services ran the program and many times almost eliminated the program because of the financial drain. The Activity Center was picked up by Red River Human Services Foundation in 2001 and currently we lose \$80,000-\$100,000 per year operating it. We operated without State funds until 2013, when the Legislature approved \$150,000 per Biennium for the two DD providers or \$37,500 per year per provider. This is why I am asking for your support to increase the funding by \$150,000 per Biennium, which will give the two providers \$75,000 per year. I would also really appreciate if you could add an annual inflationary increase to the Bill to help us with annual inflationary increases. Please support the Activity Center and the LISTEN Center by increasing the total Biennial funding from \$150,000 per Biennium to \$300,000 per Biennium. This is a small amount compared to other requests you receive, but it will keep us up and running our programs to support people with disabilities immensely. Again, an inflationary increase would be very helpful too. Thank you and I'll be happy to answer any questions.