

Testimony Prepared for the  
**Senate Human Services Committee**

March 6, 2023

By: C. Antowan Pickett, Grand Forks County Human Service Zone Director

**RE: House Bill 1091 – Certified Family Foster Care Homes and Relative Kinship Homes**

Chair Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is C.

Antowan Pickett. I am the Grand Forks County Human Service Zone Director. Please consider my testimony in support of HB 1091.

In North Dakota, Human Service Zone Directors serve as the legal custodian of foster children. In this role, human service zones are charged with legal authority and duty to place foster children and to provide case management services. This is a critical and important responsibility and one that brings many challenges.

One such challenge is finding appropriate, responsive, and sustainable placement for each child in our child welfare system. There are many complexities, nuances, policies, and laws that impact the placement of children. However, this situation becomes additionally challenging when searching for placement for children with complex needs and when trying to place siblings, and groups, together.

Over the past few years, placement matching has become an even more complex and difficult responsibility due to multiple factors including changes in federal law, fewer mid-level placement options, access to supportive services, and overall disparity of youth needing care compared to the number of available and willing placements. These trends place great stressors on human service zones and the families we serve, as we work to ensure custodial children receive the care and services they need and deserve.

During the interim session, human service zones advocated to the North Dakota Children's Cabinet explaining system gaps and identifying needs/solutions. The Children's Cabinet heard from child welfare professionals across the state as they shared the stories of children in our child welfare system. It was agreed that North Dakota should and can do better for this vulnerable population of children.

HB 1091 addressed some of those concerns expressed to the Children's Cabinet this past year. The establishment of certified foster homes creates a needed nimbleness for our licensing process. Many individuals express an interest in caring for foster children. However, the full foster care licensing process is at times daunting and is a significant commitment. Certification provides flexibility in licensure type and provides families and/or those with a relationship with a child, to have an opportunity to express interest in being a foster care home prior to making the full commitment to full licensure. Certification requires the fostering household to still undergo required background checks and safety measures but reduces preservice training requirements from thirty hours (for full licensure) to ten hours (for certified home). As a recognized form of placement, certification provides a maintenance payment to the foster home to help support the cost of providing food, clothing, and shelter to the child. This licensing option is missing from our current placement system and one that would be helpful in meeting the needs of North Dakota's foster youth.

Another important aspect of HB 1091 is found in Section 9, Page 6, Lines 24-25. This section allows for "nonfederal funds to be used for maintenance payments to unlicensed identified relatives or unlicensed kinship relatives for no great than six months. This will be a very important tool for family members to support their own kin who are in foster care.

Kinship relative caregivers are a true blessing to our child welfare system. They allow children to live with family during a time of great uncertainty and stress. However, kinship relative caregivers need financial support to help care for their family members who are in foster care. In addition to financial support, kinship relative caregivers need time to understand their family's situation, while meeting the needs of the child. The six-month provision to provide the financial support provides the custodial agency, family, and court time to explore the next steps. HB 1091 takes an important step in supporting kinship relative caregivers.

Thank You for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1091. I stand for questions from the committee.