

Testimony of Judith Roberts on Senate Bill 2152
North Dakota Senate Human Services Committee
Jan. 18, 2023

Madam Chair Lee, Members of the Senate Human Services Committee,

My name is Judith Roberts. I am the founder of Hope Manor Sober Living Homes of Bismarck, which I opened nine years ago this week. For the year 2023, I am also the president of the National Sober Living Association, which is a national association that currently has 57 separate sober living organizations that are members. These organizations represent hundreds of sober living homes and thousands of residents.

I am here to testify in opposition to SB 2152. My opposition is not based upon any disagreement with the wonderful intentions behind the bill. I believe each one of us has one main intention and that is to keep our state, community and residents safe.

Firstly, I should mention that I am speaking on this bill as an individual, and not as a representative of Hope Manor Sober Living Homes or the National Sober Living Association. I am not registered as a lobbyist. I wanted to tell you about my background on this issue for your information, but I am not representing anyone. I am speaking for myself only.

In January of 2014, when Hope Manor opened, it was the only sober living home in the state of North Dakota. Since that time there have been multiple people and organizations who have started sober living homes in North Dakota. Some of these sober living homes are high quality, ethical and safe, but unfortunately, there may be some that are not. This is where the problem lies.

Running a safe, ethical and high-quality sober living home takes a great deal of work and dedication. In North Dakota, sober living homes have been a true grassroots movement. Most people like myself have opened a sober living home because they truly want to help save lives and create an opportunity for people seeking recovery to have that second chance they so desperately need. This is why many of the North Dakota sober living homes have already taken it upon themselves to voluntarily, without any mandate, to join a national organization to be certified. We, like you, believe it is vital for sober living homes and operators to have training, access to best practices, oversight, inspections, and a national standard of ethics. We gain all of that and more by being members of the National Sober Living Association.

Currently, sober living homes do not cost the state of North Dakota a dime of taxpayer's money. We stepped up to provide much-needed services in North Dakota and to fill a tremendous gap. Operators use their own personal resources and many, like Hope Manor, are 501(c)3 nonprofits. Generous individuals in our communities support the life-saving work we do. Operating a sober living home is definitely not a money-making enterprise and most sober living homes in North Dakota get by month-to-month on a shoestring budget. Most North Dakota operators don't get paid, and if they do, it is far below the poverty level. During my first

five years after opening Hope Manor, I did not take any income. When I stepped down as Director of Hope Manor on January 1st of this year, I was being paid \$1,500 per month. I mention this to highlight the fact that most people in sober living do it as a calling to serve others. I also mention this to provide a clear picture of what additional fees and mandates will do to the North Dakota sober living landscape. It is not an exaggeration to say that the unintended consequences of this bill may very well cause the very best sober living homes in North Dakota to close their doors.

In addition to the possible mandates and fees added by this bill, my other major concern is that the bill writes into law what is, in my opinion, the least desirable option for membership in a national sober living organization. I am referring to lines 17 and 18 which list the National Alliance for Recovery Residences (NARR) as the option for certification. I have strong objections to the bill including only NARR as a certification option, for the following reasons. When I began Hope Manor in 2014, I researched which association Hope Manor should join, because I wanted oversight, inspection, training, networking and mentorship. The NARR fees were high (approximately \$500 per house) and they now also mandate that operators use a computer system that costs \$199 per house each month.

Unfortunately, in addition to paying these expenses, I received none of what I was looking for in an association. No one ever came to inspect my homes and there was no training. In fact, I never got to connect with a live person. After a year, I gave up on NARR, and in 2015 I joined a regional association which later was absorbed by the National Sober Living Association. The NSLA dues are extremely reasonable at \$150 per house. They mandate training, and they offer free live training and mentors in each state for NSLA members. Each year, the NSLA makes inspection trips to each home. These inspections even happened during the pandemic. The association also offers an affordable annual conference. The NSLA even goes further in offering help to individual residents within the member homes by investigating all resident complaints, and they require each home to provide NSLA contact information to their residents. The NSLA knows the needs and financial challenges of the sober living operators in North Dakota, and at the same time, it requires each member to maintain the highest quality of sober living.

As such, I would urge this committee, at the very least, to amend this bill to include the National Sober Living Association into the bill's language so that North Dakota sober living operators can have the choice of membership into an affordable, active, and accessible national association.

I thank you for your time and your service to North Dakota. I stand ready to answer any questions the committee may have regarding my testimony.