

TESTIMONY SB 2215  
Human Services Committee  
January 23, 2023

Chair Judy Lee and members of Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Tom Newberger and I am the 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.

Red River Human Services Foundation operates the Activity Center in Fargo. The Activity Center has been operating since the late 1970's and has filled a void for services to 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 are not always available to them through Provider's residential and day programs. I have been in this business for nearly 37 years and I have seen where our traditional services come up short and are not able to give people the choices they 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 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 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 DSP's in the evenings and it's not possible for the staff to take someone to the park, drop them off, take another 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.

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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. Again, an inflationary increase would be very helpful too. Thank you and I'll be happy to answer any questions.