

Testimony

Senate Bill #2268

Chairman Lee

Human Services Committee

January 24th, 2023

Chairman Lee and members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 2268. I am Erica Markle, I am the Transitional Youth Services Program Administrator at Fraser Ltd. in Fargo. I provide program oversight for Stepping Stones Resource Center: our drop in center for youth ages 16-26 years of age and their children. We have had the privilege of serving the community through Stepping Stones Resource Center for 14 years. Each year we have been able to grow our outreach and increase the level of support we provide to the community. Our first year of operation we served 338 unique individuals, this past year we served 898 unique individuals; a 166% increase in clients served. We are at the point now where we have outgrown our current space and are in the process of building a new center in order to accommodate the expansion of our programming and increased level of clients served.

Stepping Stones Resource Center is structured programmatically using the Transition to Independence Process. This evidence-based model focuses on a strength-based, person-centered approach to assist youth who have emotional and behavioral difficulties. We focus on assisting the youth we serve on their journey to independence through groups, modeling behaviors, and wrap around case management. Areas of program focus are centered on gaining meaningful employment, continuing education endeavors, finding and securing stable housing, connecting with mental and physical health service providers, and becoming an active member in the community.

Throughout the years, we have seen our target population presenting to us with an increase in severity of mental health and substance use disorders. During the COVID pandemic, this was accelerated. Many individuals in our community found themselves isolated from the community and resources they used to turn to. This only highlighted the importance of our drop in center. When it felt like everywhere in the community was shutting down, we and other human service agencies stayed open. We provided what many of our clients identified as "life saving measures". We gave them food when they had nothing to eat, we gave them shelter when they had nowhere else to go. We have seen a community need for food baskets like never before. We have increased the amount of food given to individuals and families by over 60 percent these past three years. We are seeing the lasting effects of COVID and the high inflation rate on groceries impacting our neighbors and are grateful to be able to help. We have seen an increase of 35 percent in the amount of food we are getting from Great Plains Food Bank for community distribution.

Furthermore, we assisted in preventing dozens of suicides from youth who felt hopeless. I can testify to this as the youth have disclosed this information to us after the fact. One individual who will provide testimony on how Stepping Stones Resource Center assisted them informed me that "if it wasn't for this place I wouldn't be here and would have ended it a long time ago. Thank you for never giving up on

me". 79 percent of the youth we serve at Stepping Stones Resource Center have a mental health diagnosis, 62 percent of the youth have a chemical dependency diagnosis, and 30 percent of the youth we serve are survivors of human trafficking. Having a community space for these individuals to be safe, to get their needs met, and to learn skills is vital to the community.

We see the individuals we serve as more than just a number. We know them by name, know their story, and know their dreams. It is due to this connection that we are successful in assisting them in their goals surrounding independence and becoming an integrated member of society. Currently, 54 percent of our youth we serve are employed, close to 10 percent of our youth are enrolled in college, getting their GED, or are attending High School. We are striving to only increase these numbers and our community supports.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you chairman Lee and members of the Human Services Committee.

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I am AB, I am a single mom to three children, and infant, a 2 year old, and a three year old. SSRC took me and my children into their shelter when I had nowhere else to stay. They helped me get into my own apartment. They help my children and I face challenges that we would have faced alone. When I was recovering from my C-Section, the staff were very helpful in terms of my physically being unable to do certain things. They also provide assistance even now, often going out of their way. My children have built excellent relationships with the Fraser staff. They help me with hygiene products, food, and baby supplies. I am very grateful this program exists.

I am MK, I am a mother staying in the shelter. Stepping Stones has been extremely helpful with providing a living area for my family of 5. They've provided us with not only diapers and clothing but with lunch every day as well. They workers here are very good at communicating and working with us. They are also very caring and more than willing to help when asked. Overall, I do feel safe here. My kids have a warm bed and shower. We wouldn't have any of this without Stepping Stones.

I am CR, Stepping Stones Resource Center gave me a place to stay, food to eat, and provided for all my basic needs when I had nowhere else to go. They helped me with my mental health and supported me when I was suicidal. I wouldn't be here today without their support.

I am CB, Stepping Stones Resource Center helps me with my mental stability. They help me remember to take my medications and assist me with getting to and from my appointments. They give me a place to sleep, food, somewhere to be warm during the day. They are helping me find employment. The staff are like my family. They care about me and everyone here and want the best for us.

I am DB, Stepping Stones Resource Center helped me after trafficking. They gave me a safe place to be. They are helping me get back on track to being on my own feet. They are helping me plan for my future. I am now searching for employment, getting all my vital documents again, and helping me search for apartments.