

Testimony

SB 2268

Chairman Lee

Good Morning Chairman Lee and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Sandra Leyland, Chief Executive Officer for Fraser Ltd., in Fargo. We began as the Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers. Since our inception in 1893 we continue to meet the needs of children, youth, and adults. Services and resources have grown to include independent living supports, residential services, and day support services for people with disabilities; childcare services for children who are typically developing and children with special needs; and transitional youth services which provide case management for skill training, and basic needs resources for transition age youth (16 – 26) and their children. In 2012, after recognizing the fact we could not *find* timely outpatient mental health services to meet the needs of our youth in crisis, we opened Valley Hope Counseling Center for the surrounding community. By stepping out to help others in the community, we also helped our youth by providing readily accessible, professional therapists.

Stepping Stones Resource Center – (SSRC), a low barrier resource center serving youth without judgement and providing person centered planning.

In 2006, a grassroots effort began to take shape identifying a unique population of adolescents and young adults at risk of homelessness, incarceration, suicide and human trafficking. Prior to opening Stepping Stones Resource Center (SSRC) in 2009, a study conducted by the University of Mary in 2008 reviewed 14 different programs around the country addressing similar needs. (SEE ATTACHMENT A – Fraser’s Center for the Transition Age Youth) Recommendations from the study were based on techniques proven by industry leaders. Focus areas included job, home, mental and physical health care, fulfilling personal relationships and good education.

The following ten items were recommended to Fraser Ltd., by the study. We answered as follows:

1. Provide housing programs – in 2010 Fraser began transitional housing and in 2014 the permanent housing program also known as Butler House opened.
2. Hire Peer mentors – we did not use this approach, however, peer mentors do operate in North Dakota’s Free through Recovery Program.

3. Offer supported employment programs – we did not accomplish as described, but our case managers assist youth in finding community employment. Fifty-four percent of our youth are employed.
4. Collaboration with local law enforcement – this has been on-going since the inception of SSRC. We are thankful to have had and currently have, liaisons working with us from the Fargo Police Department. It makes a HUGE difference to our program.
5. Encourage LEGISLATIVE action – our first efforts began with a Senate resolution which eventually became HB 1014. Our thanks to Senators: Lee, Mathern, and the late Senator Tom Fischer.
6. Involve youth in planning – this is conducted on an informal basis at monthly meetings with staff. Current plans are being reviewed to add a youth to our board. This position would participate in agenda items impacting the SSRC and residential programs.
7. Seek funding from counties and local governments – Funding for the transitional age youth program which includes housing and the SSRC, is currently dependent on in-kind donations, grants, special events, and the generosity of donors, along with the never ending efforts of Fraser employees from *all* departments. Our success rate with private grants in the past five years is 23/46 or 50%. National averages indicate between 7.4 % and 30 % of private grants submitted are ever awarded. Applying for grants and relying on them makes budgeting very difficult from year to year. Competition is steep. There is never a guarantee on what dollar amount will be accepted. Our success rate for governmental grants in the past 5 years is 14/16 or 87.5 %. National averages of governmental grants received is 20%. HUD and the Department of Commerce information of the past 5 years indicated 74.8 % of the requested amount was granted. We are seeking state funding.
8. Hire a technical/psychological consultant – Fraser was fortunate to originally obtain behavioral and psychiatric support from Dr. Rachel Fleissner, a former Fargo psychiatrist and recipient of a BUSH Fellowship award. As mentioned above, we eventually opened Valley Hope. A key step has been training case managers and others in crisis management and trauma associated with mental health & addiction issues.
9. Implement constant quality monitoring – Fraser completes annual operational reports to evaluate our outcomes. (2019/2020 Annual Operational Transitional Youth Services data available upon request.) We also employ quality assurance staff and use best practices from other disciplines whenever possible to support a diversified target population. The

demographics of the target population includes *approximately* 20 % of youth self-reporting disabilities, Autism spectrum, poor mental health, suicidal thoughts, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and more. We know the percentage is much higher.

10. Utilize wrap around approach – Our program model serves youth in 7 transition domains of their lives; employment, career building educational opportunities, living situations, personal effectiveness & well-being, and community-life functioning. This is known as the Transition to Independence Process (TIP). This is an evidence-based approach (R. Loeth, personal communications, June 30. 2008)

In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, Fraser began a bricks and mortar capital campaign to build a new Stepping Stone Resource Center and remodel an existing building for additional permanent supportive housing. We needed physical space to allow for safety, privacy, and dignity of youth served while improving efficiency. This is being done on the current campus. The location is residential with a local alternative high school and community amenities including bus transportation nearby. It is a 6 million dollar project and we have completed over 50 % of the required funding, with 2.6 remaining. We are not asking for funding of the capital campaign. Personal donations have built this campus and we will continue to seek them, also grants or in-kind support. Donors are not as likely to fund *operational costs* so we are seeking financial assistance from the state. The \$2,000,000 request for a pilot in SB 2268 would not only assist Fraser Ltd., in continuing our service model (hopefully improving it as we go) and collecting data in support of the mental health needs of our youth, it would also make available much needed revenue for other providers across the state to continue their mission and hopefully gain momentum from a pilot project. An example of a state network partner with similar program goals would be the Lake Region Community Shelter in Devils Lake, Executive Director is Brenda Bergsrud.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the pilot would be to identify how youth services can operate as part of ongoing behavioral and other health programs of the State. Despite our best efforts, we have not been able to fully tap existing programs and funding sources even though our goals are very much in alignment. We hope to clearly identify how youth services can function within programs such as Free through Recovery, 1915 (i), Community Connect and others.

I would like to end my testimony with a story from the very early days of Stepping Stones Resource Center. As a mom and a grandma it's personal for me. This story, is an experience my mind flashes back

to almost every time I pick up a newborn and feel the weightlessness, the almost *nothingness* wrapped in a blanket. So tiny, innocent, trusting – at the mercy of the person holding them.

It had been subzero temperatures for days, not uncommon in the middle of a North Dakota winter. A three month old had been brought in to SSRC in a car seat wearing a nappy and a paper-thin receiving blanket. He needed a diaper change. The little boy's mother had to get to work. She was single, no family supports and had limited resources. She was trying to do the right thing, go to work and provide for her son. Her next steps were misguided...but fortunate for her son.

She passed off her son to friends at the bus transfer station. They were SSRC participants and came to our case management staff for direction. They called me. The program director placed the three month old little boy in my arms – there was NO WEIGHT – he felt like a newborn. There was NOTHING in his eyes but somehow those deep brown liquid pools still reached out and literally took hold of my heart and soul.

It was sometime later it came back to me – if He brings you to it, He will bring you through it. We are getting through it and appreciate this opportunity to appeal to you in the form of SB 2268.

Thank you again Senator Lee for allowing Fraser staff to appear by video this morning.

This concludes my testimony.

Executive Summary

Fraser LTD, a non-profit organization located in Fargo, ND, contacted the University of Mary in the summer of 2008 and requested the help of a student consultant group. They wished to design a program called the Circle of Trust. The Circle of Trust aims to help adolescents and young adults make successful transitions into adulthood. Fraser asked the student consultant group to verify what services they should offer, determine what type of staff is required, and explore how programs are traditionally funded.

We examined 14 different agencies by reviewing websites and obtaining interviews with staff members at several organizations. Most agencies used generally accepted behavior modification techniques which were appropriate for transition age youth. Four of the agencies were funded through a special federal grant. They were required to use the same model as a condition of receiving this grant. All of the agencies showed success is possible when working with this population.

Our recommendations for Fraser LTD are based on techniques that have been proven and recommended by industry leaders. Fraser should not build this project from the ground up. Transition age youth want jobs, homes, mental and physical health care, fulfilling personal relationships, and good educations. They just need help when they have difficulty putting all of those pieces together. Fraser should provide residential programs, offer peer mentoring programs, and find employment opportunities for transition age youth. Fraser should also perform outreach activities and collaborate with local authorities to make the Circle of Trust a community-based organization.

