

Chairman Lee and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in favor of SB 2341 today. My name is Laura Feldmann, I am the Executive Director at Home on the Range, a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) near Beach, ND.

Senate Bill 2341 would allow North Dakota to exercise an option under the Family First Prevention Services Act to create a residential program specifically for sexually exploited and trafficked youth. Home on the Range is currently serving this population within the QRTP system. However, the QRTP parameters prevent us from implementing the best practice recommendations for this population, especially regarding lengths of stay.

Home on the Range began tracking our work with sexually exploited and trafficked youth in 2018. Between 2019 and 2022, we have had 154 female admissions. Of those 154 girls, 122 of them were sexually exploited or trafficked, 79% of the ND girls admitted to Home on the Range have been sexually exploited or trafficked. Since 2018, Home on the Range has done extensive training, research, and hired expert consultants in the field of human trafficking. We have joined with the Bureau of Criminal Investigations, 31:8, the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force, Youthworks, ND Multidisciplinary teams, and numerous others to increase our knowledge, skill set and provide the best possible programming for these youth.

In the PDF you have received, you will find general information about Home on the Range and the work we do. You will see data on the youth we serve and what they bring with them. You will read the stories of a few of our youth and the unimaginable circumstances they found themselves in, and the lessons they learned with us. You will see statistics related to what we have seen

in our female youth since 2019 related to this issue. You'll find a detailed list of research treatment recommendations for youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and/or trafficking. Home on the Range provides treatment to these youth. We are dedicated, passionate, and knowledgeable.

There has been a great deal of research about what treatment works best for sexually exploited and trafficked youth. Home on the Range has worked diligently to check off these boxes as we gained expertise over the last several years working with this population. However, one of the key factors to successful treatment is out of our reach. The best research recommends 18-24 months of residential treatment for these youth. Due to the QRTP parameters, our average length of stay for the last year is just under 3 months.

You will see in the PDF you received that 88% of all of our female repeat admissions were kids that were sexually exploited and or trafficked. Kids who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking build huge walls to keep outsiders away because of many factors including but not limited to fear, guilt, shame, and survival. It takes time, patience and consistency for these youth to consider cracking these concrete walls and risk building new relationships. Therapy cannot take place without a relationship. It is the cornerstone to healing.

One of the most successful ways to crack these walls and work with the kids to risk building new relationships, is by joining with our horses and dogs to do animal-assisted therapy. Our kids have very little success in having safe, reciprocal relationships prior to coming to us. The kids engage with the animals, they find them safe, and good listeners. It never ceases to amaze me, how our kids so often feel safer with a 1200-pound animal than they do with most men, or

women. The animals are not judgmental and don't stereotype our kids or blame them for the baggage they brought with them to treatment. A lot of our kids learn what safe relationships look like and feel like working with our animals. Our job becomes transitioning those skills learned in the kennel or barn to relationships with peers, adults and family members.

I had one trafficked young lady who was given a task in the arena to build a representation of the home she came from, and the home she wanted for her future. This young lady was torn between loyalty to the family and life she spent the last 17 years in, and the dreams she had for a different future for herself. As she built her homes out of PVC pipe and pool noodles, Sami, her horse stood by the side and watched. This youth labeled the walls and floor of the house she grew up in with the words lies, loyalty, kind of love, and drugs. Her future home held labels including school, sobriety, trust and love. She then brought Sami to her two homes. Sami pulled back and had nothing to do with the home she grew up in, and went to stand by the home she wanted. For her, this made things very clear, where she came from, and where she wants to go.

Ending the Game is a curriculum created by Rachel Thomas, who is a survivor and an appointed member of the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. Ending the Game is nationally recognized as a promising practice in working with exploited and trafficked youth. Ms. Thomas and I have had several conversations about our work with her curriculum. Home on the Range is the first and only program to implement equine-assisted therapy as an add on to her curriculum. And she loves it. Ms. Thomas is so intrigued that she highlighted a clip of one of our youth working with her horse on the Ending the Game website. Ms. Thomas has also stated her intentions to come to ND in August and with permission, bring her video crew and interview any willing youth who have been

exploited or trafficked, about their experiences at Home on the Range. We are making national waves with our program. We could work together to put ND on the cutting edge of work done with these youth.

People have hurt these youth. Kids whose family members trafficked them for drugs, whose 30-year-old boyfriends turned them out to friends.

We provide best practices, evidenced-based programs to our kids designed to teach them about how they got into “the life”, how coercion works, what to watch for, and how to get out of the life when they are ready. You couple this with skill building in a safe environment, these youth have a chance. What gets in the way, is the current structure required by being a QRTP. The area we fall short on is the recommended length of stay that these youth require to make the significant changes to keep them safe.

As I mentioned Home on the Range is currently a QRTP. There are, however, aspects of this structure that are not conducive to some of the best practices identified in the body of research on sexually exploited and trafficked youth. For example, research recommends an 18-24 month stay for this population, something not allowed under the QRTP parameters.

We agree that children should be placed in home settings as soon as safely possible. The Family First Prevention Services Act itself, however, recognized that there exist some populations who will need additional time. This is why the federal law allows QRTPs as well as placements that provide “high quality residential care and support services to children and youth who have been found to be,

or are at the risk of becoming, sex trafficking victims, in accordance with each state's policies and procedures.”

Senate Bill 2341 would allow the state to begin the process of exercising the additional option under the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Youth who qualify for this program would be of little or no additional cost to the state, they would just be receiving services under a different umbrella. While the length of placement would be longer, the numerous repeat stays is likely to shrink per national research recommendations. Home on the Range would of course continue to track the length of stay, and repeat admissions with both programs to continue to ensure we are being good financial stewards while providing the best care to our youth.

For these reasons, we ask for a Do Pass recommendation on Senate Bill 2341.

Any questions?