

Senate Judiciary Committee
Testimony In Support of Senate Bill #2067
1-4-23

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee.

For the record, my name is Paula Condol. I am the Director of the Dakota Children's Advocacy Center, here in Bismarck, Dickinson, McKenzie County, and Standing Rock. I am here today to ask for your support for Senate Bill 2067.

The Children's Advocacy Centers in North Dakota are committed to improving the response to child abuse. Each CAC is a community partnership that utilizes a comprehensive multidisciplinary team approach in supporting alleged victims and investigations of child abuse. Professionals from social services, law enforcement, prosecution, victim advocacy and the medical and mental health communities meet under one roof so that a child only has to tell of his or her abuse one time. Sensitivity to the needs and abilities of children is the hallmark of the children's advocacy center model which is utilized at nearly 900 Children's Advocacy Centers, in all 50 states across the country. Including eight sites here in North Dakota.

Child abuse happens in North Dakota. In 2022 Children's Advocacy Centers in ND served 2,690 people and provided 44,969 services to them. Every year our centers see children that are repeatedly sexually abused, often by those they know and trust. Some have beaten, sustained broken bones, and sometimes lifelong head injuries. Many have witnessed violence and at times been exploited through pornography and trafficking. Children's Advocacy Centers offer environments that are safe, friendly, and warm. This welcoming atmosphere makes the situation less stressful for the child and as a result they may be more open to sharing their horrific experiences.

One of the services we offer is a forensic interview. The forensic interview process allows the child to tell their experience in a safe, child friendly environment and is used a child's statement in an investigation. The process is unique because all investigative parties participate in a single interview with the child. At Children's Advocacy Center, one professional interviews the child in a child-friendly room. Law enforcement, prosecution and social services participate in the interview via a closed-circuit television. They contribute to the interview by prompting the interviewer to ask specific questions during breaks. With all parties involved, the interviewer can gain all necessary information to protect the child and assure to that the proper steps have been followed where legal action is necessary.

In 2017 the CAC's came before the legislature to recognize forensic interviews as evidence collection and would allow CAC's to bill the Attorney General's Office for forensic interviews conducted of children that weren't covered by other means. This bill passed, however, the language in the bill only allowed the CAC's to seek reimbursement at the end of each biennium. This has caused significant strain on CAC's, who are all small non-profits and rely on funding to continue to provide services. This means that we have to pay our forensic interview staff for 24 months before receiving reimbursement to cover their services. Its not sustainable and we are here today to ask you to rectify this by changing the statute to allow CAC's to bill the AG's office at the time of the service.

Children's Advocacy Centers in ND play a critical role in ensuring the safety of abused children in our state. We greatly appreciate the support and confidence the Legislature has in the services we provide. I am the first to wish our centers could close our doors and go out of business, but until we can do so knowing that NO child in North Dakota needs our help, I ask you for your support.

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today and I am happy to try and answer any of your questions.