

**TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE 68th LEGISLATIVE SESSION
SENATE STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE
MARCH 2, 2023
IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1071**

Chairman Roers, members of the Senate State and Local Government Committee, my name is Debbie LaCombe and I'm the Preparedness Chief at the Department of Emergency Services (DES) for the State of North Dakota. I am here today to testify in support of House Bill 1071, a bill that provides an option for local jurisdictions to enter into agreement with the state to fill the role of the local emergency manager.

Having an active local emergency management program ensures every citizen in the state has someone responsible for preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters. Local preparedness limits impacts on citizens, as well as limits the costs of response and recovery when disasters strike. This value has been previously identified by the legislature and has since become a requirement for each county to establish an emergency management program under North Dakota Century Code (NDCC) 37-17.1-07. The intent of House Bill 1071 is to provide counties who are unable to hire a local or multi-county emergency manager an option to enter into agreement with the Department of Emergency Services to provide this service through the regional emergency response coordinator program. I would like to stress; this bill does not require any county to enter into an agreement with the state for these services and is intended to fill a gap when a county is unable to find their own local or shared multi-county emergency manager.

Current Century Code (NDCC 37-17.1-07) requires each county to "maintain an emergency management organization that serves the entire county or must be a member of a regional emergency management organization that serves more than one county." While the majority of counties in the state have an emergency management program staffed by one or more emergency managers, there are several instances where multiple counties share an emergency manager effectively. Still, due to limited availability of qualified individuals in some of the state's least populated counties, there has been a difficulty to identify, hire and retain emergency managers to meet the current requirements under NDCC and provide professional emergency management services. Most counties in the state participate in the Emergency Management Performance Grant program which provides federal funding to local jurisdictions to support a local program, but the funding is often not enough to pay a full-time emergency manager. Many times, this results in a county employee having emergency manager duties assigned in addition to a separate primary role.

The DES currently employs four regional emergency response coordinators who travel throughout their assigned region and coordinate with local emergency managers to assist with local, state and federal initiatives. During a disaster, they are a key liaison between local emergency operations leadership and state leadership. The leadership team at NDDDES has assessed the anticipated workload increase that HB1071 would create and believe that the duties can be absorbed within the existing full-time employee and full-time temporary workforce.

The regional emergency response coordinators have existing relationships within the counties they may end up serving, as well as programmatic and planning experience in the expected tasks. In the event of a large-scale disaster, NDDDES would likely have to scale the response workforce holistically as is already common practice. No significant impacts to state readiness are expected and the minor impacts are deemed worth it to have all citizens in the state covered with a vibrant emergency management program.

As described in the previously submitted and attached fiscal note detail, the anticipated fiscal effect on the state is an estimated general fund revenue not to exceed \$193,176 in the 2023-2025 biennium. The estimated income was based on 4 counties participating for the full biennium with each paying for 25% of a regional emergency response coordinator's salary and benefits. In the 2025-2027 biennium, the estimates were doubled to include 8 counties paying the 25% rate. In the 2025-2027 biennium, any revenues exceeding 25% of an individual regional coordinator's income would reimburse the state Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) that funds 75% of the coordinator position. Both the 23-25 and 25-27 projections were calculated using the highest reasonable rate of program adoption but are expected to be lower than reported. In practice, I expect participating counties to reimburse the state with local funds already allocated at the local level for the emergency manager position, making the practical impact on counties negligible. There are currently no identified counties waiting to participate in the program.

Ms. Chairman, this completes our testimony. I would like to leave you with these final thoughts. Disasters are becoming more frequent and more impactful across the world, the country, and the state. At this pivotal time emergency managers are becoming more important than ever, but the challenging workforce environment has made it difficult to recruit the professionals needed to serve the citizens. Providing our counties with another tool in the toolbox at no additional cost to the state helps to ensure that our local jurisdictions can prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. The citizens deserve that.