



HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

Thursday, September 4, 2025
Roughrider Room, State Capitol
Bismarck, North Dakota

Senator Kyle Davison, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m.

Members present: Senators Kyle Davison, Dick Dever, Kathy Hogan, Judy Lee, Michelle Powers; Representatives Karen A. Anderson, Mike Beltz, Jayme Davis, Kathy Frelich, Jared Hendrix, Carrie McLeod, Nico Rios, Karen M. Rohr

Members absent: Representatives Dwight Kiefert, Matthew Ruby, Gregory Stemen

Others present: Jonathan Alm, Jessica Thomasson and Pat Traynor, Department of Health and Human Services; Adam Anderson, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Zach Greenberg, Department of Labor and Human Rights; Jena Gullo, Missouri Slope Areawide United Way; Jennifer Henderson, North Dakota Housing Finance Agency; Lindsey Solberg Herbel, Donna Sorensen*, Nicole Swartwout*, Kristen Vetter*, School for the Deaf

See [Appendix A](#) for additional persons present.

**Attended remotely*

Chairman Davison commented on the committee's assigned studies and discussed reviewing other states' programs and finding solutions.

Mr. Keith Mantz, Fiscal Analyst, Legislative Council, reviewed the [Supplementary Rules of Operation and Procedure of the North Dakota Legislative Management](#).

STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Mr. Mantz presented a background memorandum titled [Homelessness in North Dakota](#). He provided information regarding the study directed in Section 30 of Senate Bill No. 2014 (2025).

Ms. Jennifer Henderson, Director of Community Housing and Grants Management, North Dakota Housing Finance Agency, presented information ([Appendix B](#)) regarding the background, programs, and potential solutions available through the North Dakota Housing Finance Agency (NDHFA). She noted:

- NDHFA is the lead applicant for the North Dakota Continuum of Care and is responsible for coordinating the process with its partners.
- The federal Emergency Solutions Grant and the North Dakota Homeless Grant provide the majority of state funding for shelter operations but only represent about 5 percent of needed funding.
- The opening doors landlord risk mitigation program provides landlord's with additional coverage for excess damages when renting to an individual with rental barriers. The program could use additional state funding to be expanded.
- Affordable housing programs, to increase the housing supply, include new construction and rehabilitation and accessibility updates to both multifamily and single-family structures.

- Property tax exemptions for affordable housing could be extended from only properties owned by political subdivisions and nonprofit entities to other owners.

The committee requested a listing of awards from NDHFA through the Emergency Solutions Grant and North Dakota Homeless Grant programs. Chairman Davison asked NDHFA to provide additional information on its recommendations for additional funding for programs to assist with homelessness at the committee's next meeting.

Ms. Jessica Thomasson, Executive Director, Human Services, Department of Health and Human Services, presented information ([Appendix C](#)) regarding housing crisis risk factors. She noted:

- Data available on homelessness and housing crisis could be improved.
- The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) documented more than 13,000 households at risk of homelessness over a 3-year period which applied to ND Rent Help for emergency rental assistance or eviction prevention.
- The housing budget standard for an individual is 30 percent of income and 70 percent of jobs in North Dakota pay an average wage of \$30 per hour or less.
- Units with more affordable rent are in demand because individuals with higher wages still want a lower housing cost.

Chairman Davison asked DHHS to provide recommendations on areas of opportunity and to continue to work with NDHFA on solutions.

Mr. Adam Anderson, Transitional Planning Program Manager, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, presented information ([Appendix D](#)) on department programs for individuals on supervision experiencing homelessness. He noted:

- Programs and services available when released include case management services, free through recovery, and mental health release and integration.
- Transitional facilities are community-based centers to assist with reintegration into society after incarceration.
- Barriers to housing include stigma; lack of affordable housing; and eligibility issues, including credit rating, behavioral health, and substance abuse.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Anderson indicated the supervision population is reported by the communities where they live. In response to questions from committee members, he noted the numbers did not include county jail releases, only those sentenced to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

In response to a question from a committee member, Mr. Anderson indicated he would provide information at a future meeting regarding the per person cost of the subsidized housing.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Henderson indicated that recovery providers typically refer people under supervision to the opening doors program.

Ms. Jena Gullo, Executive Director, Missouri Slope Areawide United Way, presented information ([Appendix E](#)) on the Center for Opportunity homeless shelter. Ms. Gullo noted:

- Of the homeless individuals served at the Center for Opportunity, 80 percent did not return to homelessness.
- Of those discharged from prison and jail, 33 percent are served at the Center for Opportunity.
- The Center for Opportunity arranges for services to assist clients with birth certificates, Social Security cards, child care, mental health and substance abuse, financial literacy, career readiness, and housing assistance.

- The center served 531 unique individuals in 2024 and an average of 100 each night. Of those served, 32 percent are Native American and 12 percent are chronically homeless.

In response to questions from committee members regarding the need for more resources, Ms. Gullo noted that \$532,000 was spent last fiscal year, including 4 months during which the center was open only overnight and 8 months for which the center was open 24/7. She indicated \$750,000 to \$1 million is needed for full 24-hour operations year round.

Ms. Chandler Esslinger, Executive Director, FM Coalition to End Homelessness and Board Chair for the North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People, provided testimony ([Appendix F](#)) on the continuum of homelessness response system functions across the Fargo-Moorhead area. She noted:

- The five areas of the homelessness response system include outreach and coordinated entry, emergency shelter, supportive housing and rapid rehousing, affordable housing and stabilization, and prevention and diversion.
- Of available Emergency Solution Grant and North Dakota Homeless Grant funds, 60 percent is provided to emergency shelters, but this amount accounts for only 5 percent of the overall budget for the emergency shelters.
- Every \$1 spent on prevention or diversion saves about \$4 in expense of having someone be in a housing crisis and enter the homeless response system.
- Outreach and coordinated entry and emergency shelters are overutilized, while the other services are under resourced. The other areas need more emphasis to reduce homelessness and reduce the amount of time spent in homelessness.
- Average wait time to receive a housing voucher is 6 months.
- Homelessness is increasing due to a lack of affordable housing and services to address homelessness.
- Short-term solutions include a steering committee that designed interventions to address immediate community crisis. Long-term strategy includes the Cass Clay Interagency Council on Homelessness to develop a coordinated cross-sector strategy to address regional challenges.

In response to a question from a committee member, Ms. Esslinger noted the delay in receiving housing vouchers is due to a combination of limited resources causing prioritization of needs which results in slower identification of individuals entering a crisis.

Ms. Renae Moch, Director, Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health, provided comments on Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health's use of local opioid settlement funds to address addiction, homelessness, and behavioral health crisis.

Sister Kathleen Atkinson, Director, Ministry on the Margins, provided information ([Appendix G](#)) on homelessness. She indicated the need for a 24-hour per day low-barrier shelter. She noted the Ministry on the Margins' coffee house has up to 70 people sleeping on the floor each night.

In response to a question from a committee member, Ms Atkinson indicated that working poor do not have sufficient funds for a security deposit and first months rent needed to obtain housing. She noted available affordable housing is 37 units for every 100 eligible families.

The committee discussed the study on homelessness in North Dakota and committee members suggested the study plan include the following:

- Review data on the number of homeless individuals in the state and options to improve data collection systems.
- Review data on the number of Native American individuals who are homeless and whether Native Americans are overrepresented.

- Review data on the number of veterans who are homeless.
- Review the structure and funding of the North Dakota Interagency Council on Homelessness, Continuum of Care with NDHFA as the collaborative applicant, and Consolidated Plan for homelessness as prepared by the Division of Community Services, Department of Commerce.
- Review options to identify people at risk of becoming homeless.
- Consider the need for additional homeless shelters.

STUDY OF ACCESSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE DEAF, HARD OF HEARING, OR HAVE HEARING DIFFERENCES

Mr. Mantz presented a background memorandum entitled [Accessibility of Government Services for Individuals Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Have Hearing Differences - Background Memorandum](#). He provided information regarding the study directed in House Bill No. 1097 (2025).

Mr. Zach Greenberg, Commissioner, Department of Labor and Human Rights, presented information ([Appendix H](#)) on a department refresher, an outline of the legal framework, the department's role, challenges and opportunities, and how the department can be involved and assist. He noted:

- The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II requires effective communication with auxiliary aids and honoring the preferred method of the individual. Title I requires reasonable accommodations in employment. Title III requires equal access in public facing state facilities.
- North Dakota state laws extend the protections of the ADA.
- The role of the department is not a service delivery agency but a compliance agency that ensures fair treatment when it receives complaints. The department provides training and technical assistance.
- Challenges include unclear accommodation requests and staff training.
- Opportunities include consistency with effective communication policy, prevention with regular training, and using technology for captions, accessible websites, and reliable relay services.
- Next steps include sharing complaint data, providing policy input, partnering with other agencies, and supporting the committee.

Representative Kathy Frelich, Adult Outreach Specialist, School for the Deaf, presented information ([Appendix I](#)) on the School for the Deaf. She noted:

- Definitions of people with hearing differences include deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened persons, deaf and blind persons, and deaf plus deaf disabled persons.
- The barriers to effective communication include lack of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and limited use of assistive technology.
- Strategies for improvement include more ASL interpreters, video relay services, access via text or email, improved Internet access, education regarding ADA requirements, and increased use of assistive technology.

In response to a question from a committee member, Representative Frelich indicated federal tax credits are available to employers that employ an ASL interpreter.

Mr. Mike Chaussee, Executive Director, North Dakota Assistive, provided an overview ([Appendix J](#)) of assistive technology tools available to overcome limitations. He noted:

- North Dakota Assistive provides demonstrations, device loans, device reutilization, and financial assistance.
- North Dakota Assistive works to increase awareness, access, ability, and adaptation of tools by North Dakotans.

Ms. Tami Ternes, Assistive Technology Consultant, North Dakota Assistive, provided examples ([Appendix J](#)) and demonstrations of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing solutions. She demonstrated:

- Real-time captioning and transcription using a cell phone with applications such as live transcribe or flip writer.
- The pocket talker device, alerting devices, and telecommunication aids.

The committee suggested the study plan include testimony from a parents organization regarding the perspective of children and interactions with schools.

CHILD CARE PROVIDER LICENSING LAWS AND POLICIES

Ms. Victoria Christian, Counsel, Legislative Council, presented a background memorandum titled [Study of Child Care Provider Licensing - Background Memorandum](#). She provided information regarding the study directed in Section 1 of House Bill No. 1119 (2025).

Ms. Thomasson presented information ([Appendix K](#)) on child care provider licensing. She noted:

- The state receives about \$22 million in child care development block grant funds each year. DHHS processes an average of 15 to 17 new licenses per month, 75 to 80 renewals per month, and 250 inspections per month.
- DHHS provides resources for new child care providers.

In response to a question from committee members, Ms. Thomasson provided information on the Child Care Service Advisory Committee and the proposed makeup and meetings and Mr. Jonathan Alm, Chief Legal Officer, Department of Health and Human Services, indicated DHHS must establish the committee and the Legislative Management must appoint the members to the committee.

EVALUATION OF DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES CHILD CARE SERVICES

Ms. Christian presented a background memo titled [Program Evaluation of Child Care Services - Background Memorandum](#). She provided information regarding the evaluation directed in Section 2 of House Bill No. 1119 (2025).

Ms. Thomasson presented information ([Appendix L](#)) on child care services in North Dakota, including:

- Capacity and types of providers.
- The utilization, cost, and quality ratings of the programs.
- The need for affordability, availability, and quality in child care.
- Methods of measuring progress of child care programs.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Thomasson noted that overall, families in North Dakota spend 7 percent of their income on child care which is similar to the national average; however, some families pay as much as 40 percent of their income on child care.

Senator Lee distributed information from Ms. Robin Nelson, Chief Executive Officer, Boys and Girls Clubs of the Red River Valley, to the committee. ([Appendix M](#)).

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Christian provided information on the child care services study and how the program evaluators may coordinate with the study.

The committee discussed the evaluation and suggested it focus on the affordability of child care services and a comparison to other states' programs.

Chairman Davison asked the Legislative Council staff to provide a proposal for the scope of the evaluation for the committee to consider at its next meeting.

No further business appearing, Chairman Davison adjourned the meeting at 4:15 p.m.

Keith Mantz
Fiscal Analyst

Victoria Christian
Counsel

ATTACH:13