



HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, November 19, 2025
Roughrider Room, State Capitol
Bismarck, North Dakota

Senator Kyle Davison, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:04 a.m.

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

Members absent: Representatives Nico Rios, Matthew Ruby, Gregory Stemen

Others present: Nikki Aden, Michele Gee, Lacsresha Graham, Heather Jenkins*, Kay Larson, Pamela Sagness, Department of Health and Human Services; Deanna Anderson, North Dakota Hands and Voices; Katie Jo Armbrust*, Grand Forks Housing Authority; Colby Braun, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Lorraine Davis, NATIVE, Inc., and the Native American Development Center; Maria Effertz, Katie Ralston Howe, Brian Opp, Department of Commerce; Waylon Little Dog, Bismarck; Mary McCarvel-O'Connor, Department of Public Instruction; Renae Moch, Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health; Jason Stugelmeyer, Bismarck Police Department

Shannon Fleischer and Allen H. Knudson, Legislative Council, Bismarck

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

**Attended remotely*

It was moved by Senator Dever, seconded by Representative Bolinske, and carried on a voice vote that the minutes of the September 4, 2025, meeting be approved as distributed.

Chairman Davison commented on the Interagency Council on Homelessness and the outcomes of the committee.

STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Ms. Jennifer Henderson, Director, Community Housing and Grants Management, North Dakota Housing Finance Agency, presented information ([Appendix B](#)) regarding the Interagency Council on Homelessness. She reviewed the history of the Interagency Council on Homelessness and noted:

- Council members are designated in Executive Order 2025-08.
- The duties of the council include coordinating state policy, developing comprehensive strategy, and reviewing the availability of resources.

Chairman Davison requested Ms. Henderson to provide copies of the 2018 final report, the 2020 and 2021 annual reports, and a listing of the changes in the committee from the new executive order.

Ms. Pamela Sagness, Executive Director, Behavioral Health Division, Department of Health and Human Services, presented information on homeless-related issues and behavioral health and housing ([Appendix C](#)). She noted the Recovery Housing Assistance Program started in May 2022 and provides up to 12 weeks of sober living or recovery home programs for addiction.

Ms. Lacresha Graham, Manager, Addiction Treatment and Recovery, Behavioral Health Division, Department of Health and Human Services, answered questions regarding waiting lists. She noted new contracts were signed recently and the waiting lists are within each program.

Ms. Sagness provided Recovery Housing Assistance Program details and information on the Permanent Supportive Housing Program and the Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness Program. She also discussed substance use disorder vouchers and Community Connect.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Sagness noted the department monitors providers' compliance with agreements and their performance.

Ms. Nikki Aden, Director, North Dakota Housing Stability, Department of Health and Human Services, provided an update on the North Dakota Homeowner Assistance Fund and assistance with past due housing-related expenses, home repairs and modifications, and future housing stabilization. She noted the federal funding for these programs, which is from federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) carryover funds, will expire on September 30, 2026.

Ms. Michele Gee, Director, Economic Assistance, Department of Health and Human Services, discussed federal ARPA funding programs that will be ending.

Ms. Aden noted North Dakota Homeowner Assistance Funds were paid on a one-time basis to individuals for projects or assistance directly to vendors.

Ms. Shawnel Willer, Continuum of Care Coordinator, North Dakota Housing Finance Agency, presented information ([Appendix D](#)) on the establishment, responsibilities, and eligible program components of the Continuum of Care.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Willer noted federal funding associated with Continuum of Care-related services recently has been reduced.

Ms. Maria Effertz, Director, Community Services, Department of Commerce, presented information ([Appendix E](#)) on the North Dakota Consolidated Plan for Housing and Community Development. She noted the agency operates several programs, including the Community Development Block Grant.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Effertz noted lot rents are increasing for mobile home owners.

Ms. Henderson presented information ([Appendix F](#)) on followup items from the September 4, 2025, meeting, including maps illustrating homeless information by county and information on grants and awardees. She provided additional information on the grants available for housing assistance and recommendations for legislative opportunities, including continuing funding for the Housing Incentive Fund and for homeless grants.

Ms. Chandler Esslinger, Board Chair, North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People, presented information ([Appendix G](#)) on the mission, vision, and role of the coalition. She noted the need to focus on upstream prevention, rapid resolution, and sustainable housing solutions.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Esslinger noted the importance of supportive services, including employment for homeless individuals, to sustain self sufficiency, and assist homeless people with traumatic brain injuries.

Ms. Renae Moch, Public Health Director, Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health, presented information ([Appendix H](#)) on the plan for a community triage center in Bismarck, which will act as a single access point for services to assist people in crisis. She noted the final report from Health Management Associates will be completed in January 2026.

Chairman Davison requested that the report be provided to the Human Services Committee when available.

Ms. Lorraine Davis, Chief Executive Officer, NATIVE, Inc., and the Native American Development Center, presented information ([Appendix I](#)) on Native Americans living in urban areas, homelessness, intergenerational trauma, disproportionate representation of Native Americans in the justice system and homelessness, and culturally based programs as solutions.

Mr. Jason Stugelmeyer, Chief of Police, Bismarck Police Department, presented information ([Appendix J](#)) on homelessness in the city of Bismarck. He reviewed the growth of homeless people in Bismarck, police department challenges regarding homelessness, and its effects on parks and businesses.

Ms. Katie Jo Armbrust, Director, Program Development and Advocacy, Grand Forks Housing Authority, presented information ([Appendix K](#)) on housing program challenges and recommended changes to programs to reduce homelessness.

Mr. Waylon Little Dog, Bismarck, provided testimony on his path through homelessness, sobriety, working, and gaining housing.

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

Ms. Deanna Anderson, President, North Dakota Hands and Voices, presented information ([Appendix L](#)) on the organization's mission and her personal experience in raising a child who is deaf/hard of hearing. She discussed proposed solutions, including advocates, teachers, and equipment.

Ms. Mary McCarvel-O'Connor, Director, Office of Specially Designed Services, Department of Public Instruction, presented information ([Appendix M](#)) on special education services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. She reviewed the number of available American sign language (ASL) interpreters and the training the department is using to improve the ASL skills. She noted:

- Schools use Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to determine the least restrictive environment for the individual's learning.
- Challenges identified in serving students who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have hearing differences include inconsistent access to qualified interpreters, limited opportunities for interpreter development, and insufficient training for educators.

Chairman Davison requested information regarding the number of interpreters reimbursed through IEP services and the number of graduating students on an IEP due to being deaf, hard of hearing, or have hearing differences be provided to the committee.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. McCarvel-O'Connor discussed utilization of hearing devices, hearing screenings, the limited availability of ASL interpreters in smaller towns, and lack of colleges teaching ASL interpreter programs.

CHILD CARE PROVIDER LICENSING LAWS AND POLICIES

Ms. Kay Larson, Director, Early Childhood, Department of Health and Human Services, presented information ([Appendix N](#)) on the Child Care Services Advisory Committee. She noted:

- Committee members have been appointed and will be holding their first meeting on November 20, 2025.
- The Early Childhood Services Advisory Board provides advice to the committee on administrative rules.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Larson discussed feedback from licensing supervisors and others that need representation.

A committee member suggested consideration of the possibility of rural nursing homes providing day care services also serving children of nonemployees of the nursing home.

CHILD CARE PROGRAM EVALUATION AND LOAN PROGRAMS

Mr. Allen H. Knudson, Legislative Budget Analyst and Auditor, Legislative Council, presented information on the new policy and program evaluator positions in the Legislative Council. He reviewed the steps that have been taken in establishing the new division and introduced the Legislative Council's new Policy and Program Evaluation Division Director Ms. Shannon Fleischer.

Ms. Fleischer presented a memorandum entitled [*Program Evaluation of Child Care Services - Proposed Objectives and Scope*](#) regarding the proposed objectives and scope of the program evaluation of child care programs of the Department of Health and Human Services. The proposed plan includes the following focus areas:

- Availability;
- Affordability;
- Quality;
- Workforce; and
- Administration and Policy Review.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Fleischer reviewed the timeline for the evaluation and indicated the evaluation will consider potential policy changes to improve child care services.

It was moved by Representative Rohr, seconded by Representative McLeod, and carried on a voice vote to approve the proposed objectives and scope for the program evaluation of child care services as presented by the Legislative Council.

Mr. Brian Opp, Chief Executive Officer, North Dakota Development Fund, Department of Commerce, presented information ([Appendix O](#)) on the Child Care Loan Program. He noted there are 46 active loans with a balance of \$9.1 million.

In response to a question from a committee member, Mr. Opp noted loan defaults have been minimal.

Ms. Katie Ralston Howe, Deputy Commissioner and Workforce Director, Department of Commerce, presented information ([Appendix O](#)) on the Regional Workforce Impact Program. She noted:

- The program was created using federal ARPA funds.
- The program supported 58 facilities adding a total of 2,627 child care slots statewide.
- Funding was reduced and the program will no longer support child care infrastructure projects.

REPORTS

Mr. Colby Braun, Director, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, presented information ([Appendix P](#)) on the status of the Community Behavioral Health Program. Mr. Braun noted:

- Free Through Recovery was established in 2015 to improve health care outcomes and reduce recidivism.
- 9,204 individuals have been served by the program, of which 1,602 currently are participating in the program.
- The cost of the program averages \$404 per month compared to the cost of incarceration in the state penitentiary of \$155 per day.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. Sagness noted:

- Funding was increased to serve approximately 2,000 individuals.
- The number of providers has increased and access to services has improved.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Braun noted a number of inmates are affected by a history of substance abuse and mental health issues.

Ms. Heather Jenkins, Superintendent, Life Skills and Transition Center, presented information ([Appendix Q](#)) regarding the number of ineligible children served by the Life Skills and Transition Center (LSTC) pursuant to Section 11 of Senate Bill No. 2112 (2025), and discussed strategies to improve services. She noted:

- Three ineligible referrals were received and one of those was admitted, but that child has since transitioned out of the LSTC.
- Currently, 18 eligible children and no ineligible children are served at the LSTC.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

The committee discussed homelessness within groups including veterans, young adults, and senior adults.

Committee members commented regarding the deaf, hard of hearing, and those with hearing difficulties study, including children's outreach services, artificial intelligence interpretive uses, education at universities for instructors, and testing for both hearing and vision in the school systems.

It was moved by Senator Lee, seconded by Representative McLeod, and carried on a roll call vote to request the Chairman of the Legislative Management to expand the deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing differences study to include vision services.

Chairman Davison noted the committee may conduct tours of state facilities or homeless-related programs at future meetings.

No further business appearing, Chairman Davison adjourned the meeting at 3:50 p.m.

Keith Mantz
Fiscal Analyst

Victoria Christian
Counsel

ATTACH:17