

HOUSE HUMAN RESOURCES  
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

JANUARY 24, 2025

Chairman Nelson and members of the Committee, my name is Kandia Qual, Program Administrator for the Dacotah Foundation. My role within our agency is to oversee program operations within both the Fargo and Bismarck regions.

I am here to lend my support to the proposed budget presented by the Department of Health and Human Services.

First, I want to thank you for the many years of support your committee has given to the Department of Health and Human Services and the Regional Human Service Centers. I have been with our agency for more than 20 years and have worked closely with the Human Service Centers and presented to several of you throughout that time so I understand the constraints everyone is working within. The services our agency collaboratively provides would not be possible without your ongoing support. The funding we receive through our Human Service Center contracts allows us to provide essential recovery-based and residential services to the individuals in our communities who need it the most but who also experience many barriers to accessing assistance within private sector programs.

Throughout recent testimony, we have been hearing providers across the state voice the need for continued and strengthened funding. I am here to add my voice and support to that request. You have been provided a lot of data showing the changes over the past biennium in workforce trends as well as inflation costs associated in providing programs and services within the State of ND. While this is essential information to understand the concerns and issues as well as how to address them, I am going to speak from a slightly different perspective concerning the need for ongoing and strengthened funding support. I come from the 'boots on the ground' view as someone who is in the day-to-day operations trying to staff, maintain, and improve the programs in the regions I oversee.

Throughout my time with the agency, I have had the most direct experience within the Fargo region as that is where I am home-based. It is also the more competitive region for the job market so although transferrable across the state, I am most familiar to speak to what we are experiencing there. Dacotah Foundation, in Fargo, used to be able to maintain a staffing roster of approximately 90-95 employees. Our staff were frequently asking for extra hours to work and there were seldom any shifts open for them to pick up. We were competitive within the job market both in wages and benefits. Recruiting within the multi-college community was relatively easy. Fast forward through the pandemic, we now have an average staff roster of 55-60 employees. Due to the cost of inflation in all areas of life for our employees as well as us, as an agency, experiencing those same levels of inflation for our expenses, we are now struggling to recruit and retain employees. We are no longer able to be competitive with wages and benefits. The average starting wage in Fargo, regardless of the field of business, is \$2-4/hour higher than we are able to start our employees at currently. Due to this, the



employees we are able to recruit now are coming to us with less experience and less education than what we were previously able to recruit. This equates to a need for more training hours on the front end to be at the necessary level of competency which is an added burden to our already strained budgets. Within the past month, we have had 4 interviews turn down offers we made for positions due to being offered \$4-6/hour higher from another company. Also, within the past month, we have had 3 staff give their notice because they received offers with higher wages elsewhere now that they gained some minimal experience and education through us. We are in this constant state of recruitment and training only to have people leave within the first several months to a year because they now have the training for a higher wage elsewhere. I have been told by exiting staff that they love our agency and wish they could stay but they just can't turn down the financial gain of going elsewhere due to the current costs of living. On any given weekly schedule I post, we have approximately 20 open shifts that we don't have staff to fill. That equates to 160 direct care hours every week that we have to try to bargain and barter with staff to fill, offer overtime for or we are picking them up ourselves as supervisors and administrators. We don't mind working a direct care role side by side with our staff but this not only puts us into 12-16 hour work days multiple days a week but it takes us away from being able to complete other administrative and supervisory duties that assist in things such as interviewing, hiring, supporting staff growth and development and providing the quality management and development to the programs. I am seeing higher levels of burnout in both the direct care level and the supervisory level than I have seen over my many years with the agency. We are seeing people change positions, step down to less responsibility, or leave the field all together due to this. We desperately need to be able to increase our wages to become competitive again and maintain an adequate staffing roster to not only continue operations but to grow and strengthen the services we offer.

While the staffing issues and workforce changes have presented a hefty operational challenge within itself, inflation in general is also causing great concerns within our ability to operate in an adequate manner. The cost of goods, utilities, and repairs have increased dramatically. The cost of a gallon of milk was approximately \$2.45 in 2018 (pre-pandemic), the cost of a gallon of milk now is approximately \$4.78. We buy 25 gallons of milk per week between all of our Fargo programs, that's \$233.00 more per month, or \$2,796.00 more per year just for 1 grocery item that we have to purchase every month. Now consider the increase in meat prices, egg prices, and vegetable prices. You can see how quickly this adds up.

Regarding increased maintenance costs, our crisis units regularly serve individuals that are experiencing very intense symptoms of their mental health and are often agitated, escalated and in situations of distress while they are attempting to stabilize their symptomology. This often results in behaviors that cause damage to our property. This might be destruction of property as a result of violence or damage because of symptoms of their illness. Some examples of the day-to-day things we encounter are things such as someone stuffed almost a whole roll of paper towels down the toilet because they were experiencing delusions about the toilet or an individual tore apart the fabric on their mattress because they were paranoid there was a listening device implanted in it. We have had 3 large, expensive windows broken out this year by individuals that were escalated but didn't want to hurt anyone else so they

punched out a glass window before we could intervene. All of these scenarios are part of our day-to-day experiences while we attempt to help individuals stabilize the symptoms of their mental health but they also cost a significant amount of money to repair and replace, particularly with inflation costs. We are as creative as we can get with repairs. We have had painting parties instead of hiring painters, we have sought out donations of supplies needed, I have plunged and snaked more toilets than the average person and we have all worked together to learn how to do as much maintenance as we can in the most creative and inexpensive ways possible. Even with those solutions, we have had approximately \$20,000 in repair expenses at the crisis unit so far this year. This expense is just related to the crisis unit, our other programs, both in Fargo and Bismarck all experience the same concerns with maintenance, destruction of property, and increased food and supply costs due to the intense inflation the nation has experienced.

Those of us who work in this field have a passion for what we do. We believe there is hope, we believe in recovery, and we believe everyone deserves the opportunity to not only survive but to thrive within their life. Programs such as ours provide stabilization, a solid base for recovery and we give support and hope to those that need it most in their most dire times. However, in order to continue to provide these essential services, today we are asking for and needing your support towards the funding increases in the North Dakota DHHS budget. Without these funding increases to counteract the intense inflation levels and workforce concerns we have all faced, programs such as ours will not be able to continue to provide the essential services we do to our most vulnerable populations which will begin to impact communities as a whole in many concerning ways.