

January 31, 2025

House Appropriations Committee, Human Resource Division, State Hospital Discussion

Chairman Nelson and members of the Committee,

My name is Tim Mathern. For 50 years I have been working in the field of behavioral health including being guardian ad litem for persons at the state hospital and working as a social worker in outpatient and inpatient settings. Also, I am the senator from District 11.

HB 1012 presents us with a pivotal and historic opportunity to shape a behavioral health care system that will meet the needs of North Dakotans with efficiency, equity, and sustainability for generations to come. I urge you to support a regional psychiatric system of care which suggests a small number of beds needed at the state hospital.

I suspect we share a commitment to finding solutions to a behavioral health crisis. While a new centralized state hospital in Jamestown has been proposed, I believe that approach does not address the long-term needs of our state. Evidence and experience show that centralized care models often fail to provide the accessibility, resilience, and cost-effectiveness required in a state as geographically vast and rural as ours. I am afraid making a big investment at the state hospital takes our legislative eyes and spending off of the bigger picture.

A regional approach aligns with the Council of State Governments' recommendations, which emphasizes the critical role states play in building local crisis systems that move beyond stand-alone services to create comprehensive systems with an integrated continuum of care (Blandford & Ueberall, 2024). Key components include:

**Investments in Regional Care:** We need to incentivize health facilities in each of the four regions anchored with the largest cities of Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot and Bismarck. Some suggest too that we need to prevent large medical facilities from denying care for persons who suffer from mental illness.

**A Focused Role for the State Hospital:** Transitioning Jamestown State Hospital to specialize in forensic evaluations, correctional custody, and civil commitments.

**Empowering Regional Solutions:** Allowing the Department of Health and Human Services to collaborate with local providers on region-specific care models, some acute, some residential, and some outpatient.

This approach ensures that behavioral health care is rooted in the communities it serves. Decentralized care is supported by research, with a study showing a 65% reduction in hospital days and a 50% reduction in costs compared to centralized models (Integrityinc.org, 2015). It also connects individuals to local resources, family networks, and social supports, key elements in achieving and maintaining lasting recovery.

A large facility would outdo specialized staffing resources available in the city of Jamestown and be outdated before even fully operational. By contrast, decentralizing care into our four regions ensures resilience, scalability, and adaptability to changing needs over time. Our present facility in Jamestown is not fully staffed and another sister agency, DOCR, has testified to us in the Senate, that finding staff in Jamestown is the most difficult of the cities they operate in.

This session is more than a debate about infrastructure, it is a chance to build a legacy rooted in North Dakota's values of resilience, innovation, and care for our communities. Are there other important ingredients? Yes, and I note three, 1. Stable top leadership at our largest state agency, ND DHHS, 2. Implementation of the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic system, and 3, a Medicaid amendment regarding the IMD, 1965 Institute for Mental Disease provision, which would introduce market principles resulting in additional behavioral health facilities.

Governor Armstrong has urged us to be innovate and bold. I invite you to make this vision a reality. We can lead the way in creating a system that prioritizes accessibility, sustainability, and the well-being of all North Dakotans.

Thank you for your dedication to our state and your leadership on this critical issue.