



Catholic
Charities
North Dakota

House Appropriations – Human Resources Division

Testimony on House Bill 1012

Representative Jon Nelson – Chairman

February 5th, 2025

Chairman Nelson and members of the House Appropriations Committee – Human Resources Division, my name is Donna Byzewski and I am the Program Director of the corporate guardianship program for individuals with intellectual disabilities at Catholic Charities North Dakota. I am testifying in support of HB 1012 as it relates to funding for developmental disability services as well as corporate guardianship services for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The corporate guardianship contract funding in HB 1012 would have an immediate impact on reducing the waiting list for services.

For 37 years, the Developmental Disabilities (DD) Division has contracted with Catholic Charities ND to provide corporate guardianship services on behalf of adults with intellectual disabilities. The contract is very specific. We can only accept referrals from Developmental Disabilities Program Managers from the human service centers. There must be no other appropriate alternative such as family or friends who could serve as guardian. We are the guardian of last resort. The contract also specifies that we cannot refuse to serve a referral because of where that person might live – our services must be available statewide. There are critical times when a person may need the services of a guardian, and if no one else is available or appropriate, a corporate guardianship is a necessity.

On any particular day, a guardianship worker may be assisting an individual on their caseload in working through a diagnosis of a serious or life threatening medical condition which carries the responsibility of being the decision maker for difficult medical decisions which sometimes leads to end of life decisions; finding emergency housing as the person we serve is suddenly homeless and it is 10 below zero; spending hours trying to find inpatient treatment as an individual is struggling with severe alcohol and drug addictions; finding and accessing psychiatric services



when a person is experiencing mental health struggles (more than 74% of the individuals on our caseload receive the services of a psychiatrist); monitoring and reporting any incidents of suspected abuse, neglect and/or exploitation; as well as assisting an individual in obtaining restraining orders against abusive boyfriends or girlfriends or sexual predators. We are available 24 hours per day/365 days per year for emergencies or crises through our on-call system. Just in the past 6 months, our guardianship workers have made more than 722 calls or contacts after hours, weekends and holidays to manage emergency situations.

We have 16 guardianship workers who carry an average caseload of 33 people. Our guardianship workers must have a four-year degree and be either a licensed social worker or a Qualified Developmental Disabilities Professional (QDDP). They often travel 50 to 140 miles one way to visit each person on their caseload, attend team meetings, court hearings and medical appointments. Our guardianship workers' duties and responsibilities typically include the following: determining the individual's living arrangements; assuring that the person's medical needs are met and providing consent for all medical procedures, surgeries, treatments, medications, end of life decisions, etc.; arranging and authorizing educational and vocational opportunities; legal decision making; and making financial decisions as well as overseeing the individual's assets and social security benefits. Through the provision of guardianship services, we are able to intervene as necessary to ensure that the basic needs of individuals are met, that they have an appropriate place to live, that they have access to ongoing medical care and that they are receiving necessary support services.

Our waiting list continues to grow and, as of 12/31/24, our waiting list had the names of 142 people. To reduce the waiting list, we are respectfully requesting that this committee support the funding as detailed in the Developmental Disabilities portion of the ND Department of Health and Human Services budget.

The corporate guardianship program provides a very efficient, cost-effective and state-wide service. The process is streamlined with almost all of our resources being dedicated to the direct provision of guardianship services. We are a frugal program that takes very seriously that we be good stewards of the funds that we receive from the legislature. Thank you for the opportunity to stand before you today and I would be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.