

Melanie Heitkamp
Executive Director, Mountain Plains Youth Services (DBA: Youthworks)
Testimony in support of HB 1012
House Appropriations Committee – Human Resource Division
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Good morning. My name is Melanie Heitkamp, and I am the Executive Director of Youthworks, a private non-profit youth-serving agency. We have provided services in North Dakota since 1987. Our age demographic is 11 to 24, primarily adolescents and young adults. The services we provide are emergency shelter, housing for homeless youth, family counseling, individual counseling, skills groups, anger management, case management, crisis response, street outreach, drop-in services for basic needs, day programming for youth suspended or expelled from school, and anti-trafficking work with survivors of human trafficking and exploitation. We are the Attendant Care provider for law enforcement in Bismarck, Fargo, and Minot. We have emergency shelters in those same communities.

I am also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and have worked with thousands of families in my 45 years working with Youthworks and in my early practice, in rural county social services. Our mission at Youthworks is to provide a service where all youth feel safe and belong. We provide a non-judgmental place where youth and their parents can receive the immediate help and support. Our goal is to prevent youth from entering the child welfare and juvenile justice systems by providing such services. Our results in achieving these goals are excellent.

I am here to testify on the importance of the funding for the first day of shelter for CHINS youth in the emergency shelters, to support the need for crisis intervention (“diversion”) funding for CHINS youth identified by the schools, and to support the need for continued and expanded services for homeless youth.

Most of the youth who are admitted into our emergency shelter are CHINS youth where law enforcement has been asked to help because of conflict in the home. In some cases, the youth may have left their home without permission for various reasons and the parents are feeling helpless and hopeless. The issue is a family issue that is not a criminal or law enforcement issue yet the conflict in the home can elevate to where someone could get hurt without intervention. Our shelters and professional staff, provide safety, screening, assessments and discharge services for the families. With the movement of CHINS youth under the DHHS, the unintended consequence was that the funding we received through diversion funding from the courts was

discontinued. These funds were used in conjunction with our shelters to provide a seamless crisis response to the families.

Of the thousands of youth I have personally seen in my time at Youthworks, there were very few who I believed needed to be on formal probation or removed from their home. Instead, they needed early intervention and support. Of those who I believed needed more formal systems involvement, many of these families were already too frustrated to be able to address the concerns safely.

In my experience, families can become frustrated and their relationships with their children worsen without professional intervention. While we refer as many families as we can to services in the community, finances and time away from work are often a problem. Addiction issues, mental health struggles, poverty, and homelessness also contribute to the challenges these youth and families experience in accessing traditional therapy. I am fortunate to have experienced, trained staff who respond in a crisis can serve families and youth without volumes of “red tape” to walk through and understand adolescents and young adults.

Thank you for your time today. I urge your consideration for these areas in your budget to prevent youth and families from unnecessarily entering the child welfare/juvenile justice system that really wouldn't be needed. I may be reached at 701.255.6909 or mheitekamp@youthworksnd.org if you have any questions regarding my testimony today.