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Chairperson Ruby and Members of the Human Services Committee

Re: Support for HB1337 – Funding Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment in County Jails

1. Introduction

My name is Heather Baker, and I am a resident of Walsh County and a former Correctional Officer and Corrections Corporal with the Walsh County Correctional Center. I am writing to express my strong support for HB1337.

2. The Problem

When incarcerated, individuals lose all access to essential health insurance both federally or state funded and, in most cases, they lose access to private insurance, leaving our county jails responsible for the cost of treatment. These services are often unaffordable leaving many without the necessary care and increasing the risk of reoffending.

3. The Solution

HB1337 would fill this funding gap, allowing county jails to offer life-changing treatment programs. These services promote recovery, reduce repeat offenses, and ultimately benefit public safety and community health.

4. My Perspective

In my work as a Correctional Officer and a Corrections Corporal, I have seen many individuals have a break in their treatment and have seen how it negatively impacted not only them but also the safety of other incarcerated individuals, and the community as a whole. In my first 2.5 years as a Correctional Officer, I had to talk an individual down from a suicide attempt. He had been incarcerated while he was intoxicated. The individual had other factors going on that caused him to think his life was no longer worth living. At the time, we did not have mental health providers available for individuals to speak to. There was another individual hang himself while in the cell. He, thankfully, was found before any resuscitation was needed. He was sent to the North Dakota State Hospital for roughly 3 weeks. He was then sent back to the jail with no follow-up mental health treatment. In the last 2.5 years as a Correctional Corporal, I was a part of the leadership team that helped implement the services of Agassiz Associates LLC for the incarcerated individuals of the Walsh County Correctional Center, on the corrections side. During that time, I had personally referred many individuals to use the resource of Agassiz. I would happily let any individual talk to me about their problems, the issue comes when it involves their legal case. As correctional officers, we are mandated

reporters, and we must report anything told to us that involves their on-going legal cases. A mental health professional does not have that limitation. Incarcerated individuals can freely talk to them about their case without fear of legal repercussions. During my time that Agassiz was providing treatment for the individuals, I had an individual come in from a mandatory hold at the hospital. Due to the nature of his arrest, he was not doing well mentally. We were able to get him treatment through Agassiz. I do believe this saved his life as he was able to talk to someone about the case without the judgement or fear of being reported.

5. **Call to Action**

I strongly urge the committee to support HB1337 and recommend its passage. This bill is a meaningful step toward improving outcomes for individuals and our communities.

6. **Closing**

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me at 701-520-5439 or heatherlebaker@outlook.com if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Heather Baker