

Testimony
To the
Human Services Committee
On
HB 1337

Chairperson Ruby and Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Joelle Schmuck, and I am a registered nurse at Walsh County Health District since 2021. This role has included working as public health nurse as well as a correctional nurse at the Walsh County Correctional Center. I am here today to voice my strong support for House Bill 1337.

Throughout my time working as a correctional nurse, I have become very resourceful and creative in my nursing care at the Walsh County jail and trying to meet the behavioral health needs of the inmate population was no exception. Very early on in my correctional nursing journey it became evident that the available behavioral health resources were far and in between, and flat out inadequate to serve the growing needs I was seeing on a day-to-day basis. The reason for this was not because the Walsh County jail did not want to address these critical health needs, but rather it came down to funding and cost. Individuals in county jails lose access to Medicaid, Medicare, and Veterans Benefits due to the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion policy. They also often lose private health insurance coverage due to loss of employment. Because of this, county jails are unable to provide vital mental health and substance use disorder treatment which often leads further deterioration of health for the inmate and inability to successfully reintegrate into society, further perpetuating the cycle of recidivism.

First and foremost, as a nurse, I am an advocate. Advocating for my patient's needs often meant calling and reaching out to community partners, clinics, treatment centers, and providers to try to meet these behavioral health needs. I was met with the same answer repeatedly, they have no insurance coverage. There is no way to bill for these services. Have them follow up after release. I felt as though I was hitting a brick wall everywhere I turned, and in my nursing opinion, following up after release was just not good enough. It wasn't a true answer, it was a missed opportunity. That is where our partnership with Agassiz Associates PLLC. came in.

After the Walsh County Commissioners invested in the comprehensive mental health and substance use disorder treatment programming offered by Agassiz Associates PLLC. in the beginning of 2022, there was a monumental shift that occurred. For the first time since working at the Walsh County jail, I could confidently look my patients in the eye and say "Yes, we can help you." Those words carried incredible weight because for many, it was the first time they felt someone was invested in their recovery and future.

Getting this program off the ground and running was surprisingly smooth. I witnessed how trust and hope was built from the ground up with every single person that entered the program, and soon the word spread, and we had more and more inmates sign up. We have had remarkable success with participation in this program even early on. For the first time for many, their mental health issues and substance use disorders were being addressed and treated. I had the privilege of getting a front

row seat to the transformation that many of these individuals went through while enrolled in the Agassiz program. Hope for a future was being cultivated whereas so many had only believed that they would spend their entire life in and out of jails and prisons. Now someone was telling them that did not have to be their future and gave them tools and resources to make it a reality.

I am a member of the North Dakota Correctional Health Care Association which is made up of correctional nurses across North Dakota. Through conversations with other correctional nurses in the state, one thing has become undoubtably clear: the need for funding to support behavioral health programs is urgent. Most facilities in North Dakota either lack comprehensive behavioral health services altogether or have programs that are limited. There have been many instances where inmates in the Agassiz program have transferred to another county jail and have had to stop their treatment due to that jail not offering services.

That's why HB 1337 is so important. It would give jails across North Dakota the opportunity to build and tailor programs like the one we've developed in Walsh County. This funding would remove barriers to behavioral health treatment, allowing us to address the root causes of so many issues and give people the tools they need to succeed.

The ripple effect of this funding would be incredible. We'd see healthier individuals, stronger families, and safer communities. We'd see fewer people stuck in the cycle of incarceration and more people on a path toward a better future.

Chairperson Ruby and members of this committee, I urge you to support HB 1337. This isn't just about funding behavioral health services—it's about giving people a real chance to heal and rebuild their lives. It's about showing that it's never too late for a second chance.

Thank you for your time and for considering this important bill. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have.

Sincerely,
Joelle Schmuck, RN