

Chairman Ruby and members of the committee. My name is Ron Jurgens, and I am the Walsh County Sheriff. I strongly support of HB1337. For years, our county has struggled with the cost of the cycle of individuals being arrested, released, and then being rearrested. This challenge burdens law enforcement, judicial system, and taxpayers. But most importantly, it fails the individuals caught in this cycle and leaves the root causes of their incarceration unaddressed. One of the biggest gaps we've identified is access to mental health services for individuals in custody. The time spent in jail was often a time to warehouse the prisoner and keep them away from the outside world. The opportunity to intervene without the necessary resources was a lost opportunity to help our inmates instead of just warehousing them. In 2021, recognizing this need the Walsh County Health District and myself, along with the Walsh County Commission took a bold step. It was decided that the allocated funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to support mental health services in our county jail. With these funds, a 3-year contract with a mental health provider who delivered behavioral health counseling and therapy to inmates during their time in custody.

Many individuals took advantage of the program, and we saw firsthand the difference that access to professional mental health care could make. For some this was their first opportunity to address the underlying issues that contributed to their incarceration, whether it be substance use disorders or untreated mental health issues. This program has shown great promise. The demand for these services far exceeds what our current resources can support. HB1337 represents a crucial step forward. By providing dedicated funding for mental health services in county jails, this legislation would allow counties like ours to expand access to critical care and build upon the success of programs like ours. Investing in mental health services within jails is not just a compassionate choice—it is a practical and cost-effective one. By addressing the root causes of criminal behavior, we can reduce recidivism, improve public safety, and help individuals regain stability in their lives. This is an investment in people, in communities, and in a more sustainable justice system. On behalf of the Walsh County Sheriff's Office and Walsh County Jail, I urge you to support HB1337. Thank you for your time and consideration.