

Prepared Testimony of Shauna Erickson-Abou Zahr, M.S., LMFT

Testimony in Favor of House Bill 1477

Chairman Ruby and Members of the Committee:

I share my testimony in favor of HB 1477 as a person who has spent her life in our state, built my career serving the mental health of others in our state, and whom now needs you to protect one of the most sacred medical treatments of my life, which is saying something after nearly dying of breast cancer. I wanted to be a mom for decades and raise my children in Fargo where I had grown up. In 2019 I met my now husband, Dr. Abdallah Abou Zahr, an oncologist/hematologist who ended up literally saving my life. Weeks before we were set to marry in 2021, he found a mass in my breast. Unfortunately, days later our fears were confirmed, breast cancer at age 32. My dreams immediately halted, particularly my dream of motherhood.

My oncologist wanted to treat the cancer aggressively due to my age, which meant chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, however she green lighted ONE round of IVF to try to get embryos prior to starting the chemotherapy that can cause infertility. The embryos we secured were testing and saved for after treatment, but the hope of what they could one day be (my children) was truly what got me through losing my hair, intensive treatments, and despair over cancer derailing my life. Imagining the highest graded embryo in my arms one day gave me reason to live, fight, and have hope through the uncertainty, hence why I named her "Nadia" (meaning hope) back when she was just a cluster of cells. Certainly, I knew she was a cluster of cells at that point, and not a baby, but the dreams of what she could be brought me so much peace. Fast forward to 2024, and Nadia debuted on the happiest day of my life in January, and has been nothing short of a miracle brought to us by modern medicine via IVF by the only fertility clinic we have in ND.

My message is that families end up having to utilize IVF because of unforeseen personal, diverse, and devastating complications in their lives. No one signs up for having to build a family in this intensive, expensive route but having access to IVF gives North Dakotans the greatest gift of all- opportunity to become parents, and that has to be protected. Had I not had access to local, high caliber fertility treatments, I wouldn't have been able to secure embryos before my life saving chemotherapy. IVF isn't some elective procedure, it is a necessary intervention to couples becoming families in our state. As a life long resident of our region, I know what North Dakotans invest in their community, and we need to protect their access to building families, however they and their doctor determine is necessary. And let me tell you with more pride than I have ever had over anything, If there is one thing this world needs, it is more medical miracles like my sweet "Hope" baby, Nadia.

Please consider protecting access to infertility services, and vote in favor of HB 1477.

Sincerely,



Shauna M. Erickson-Abou Zahr

1/24/25